A NOVEL BY **MICK FARREN**

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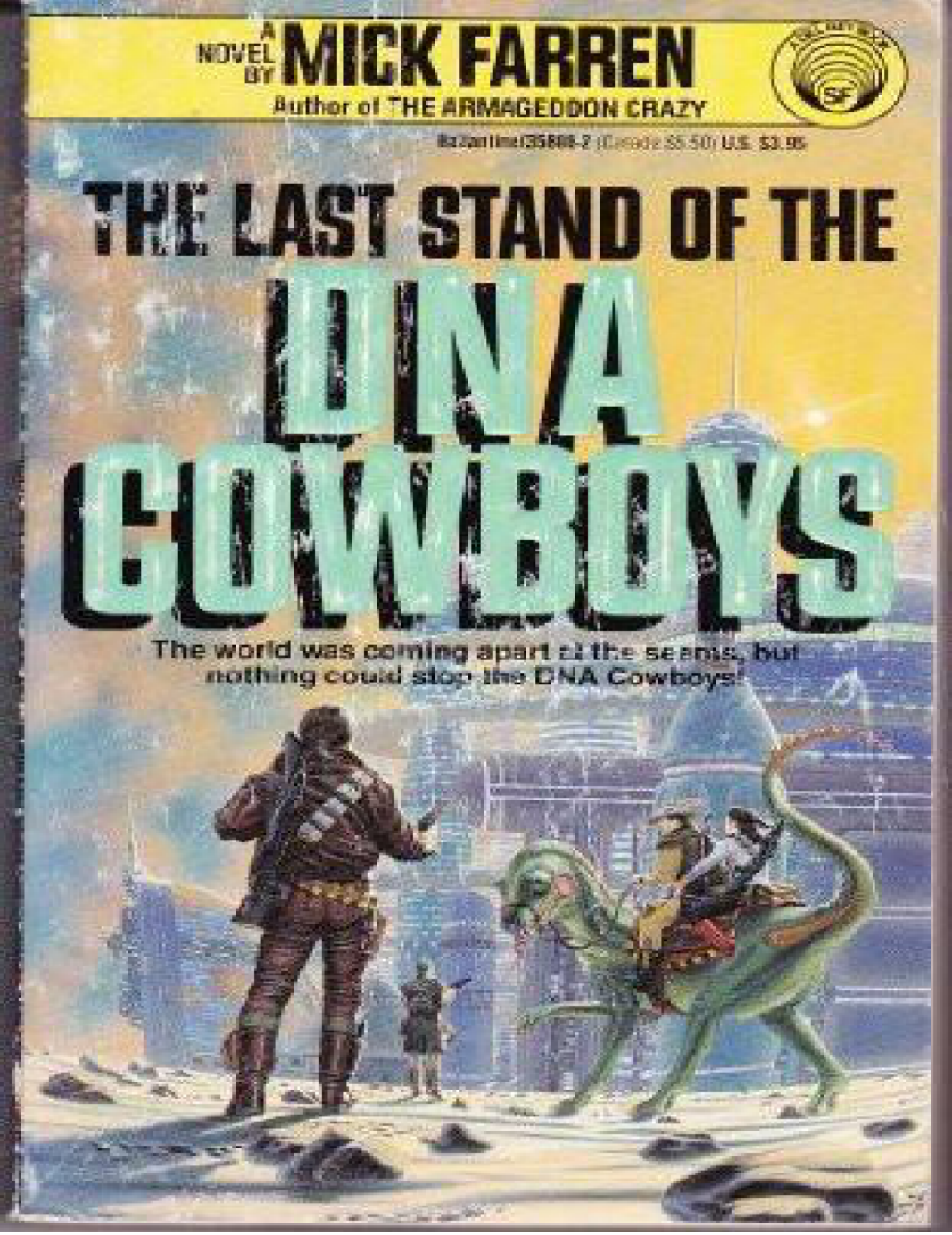
THE LAST STAND OF THE DNA COWBOYS

The world was coming apart at the seams, but nothing could stop the DNA Cowboys!



SHOUT
SHARE
IT

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Mick Farren

Last Stand of the DNA Cowboys

It was the central paradox of human behavior and, by direct correlation, all of human history. Each time humanity achieved a peak, it seemed that some pathological instinct moved it immediately to seek an abyss into which to hurl itself. Shortly after the human walked erect and organized himself into tribal groups, he hit upon the concept of warfare. Simultaneously with the discovery of fission energy, humanity began to contemplate nuclear planetary annihilation. The discovery of the Mahler drive took the species to the stars, but once it was there, it courted extinction by engaging in the disastrous Thousand Years War with the Draan Hives.

Thus it was, in the supposedly divine moment when human metaphysics freed the core psyche from the limitations of the corporeal organism, humans developed almost insurmountable problems regarding the exact nature of reality.

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER ONE

THE CAVERNS WERE ENTERING ONE OF THEIR REGULAR PHASESof melancholy, and the Minstrel Boy knew that it was time to move on. The halls and tunnels softly rang with mournful horns, and muffled drums echoed on the stairwells. It was as though the warmth had gone out of the basalt walls and been replaced by the first hint of a stiletto chill that would eventually pierce to the bone. The carvings that lined the walls had changed, too. Where once the frowns of the gargoyles had been sardonic, puzzled, or even amused, the stone eyes had begun to take on a hard, evil glint. In the Caverns such changes of mood followed a pattern that was as regular and predictable as the seasons. The soft, carefree summer of hedonism was cooling to an autumn of perverse cruelty. That, in its turn, would degenerate into a winter of dark ritual, horror, and brutality. For those who survived, spring would come with exhaustion and the final, hollow-eyed knowledge that nothing remained that could be done and that there was nowhere farther to go. Those who went to the edge eventually had to return. It brought the inevitable regeneration that enabled the cycle to turn yet again. The Minstrel Boy was strictly a summer migrant. He had no desire to experience the soul winter of the Caverns.

There were those who claimed that the changing moods of the Caverns were only a reflection of the emotional shifts of the Presence, the amorphous, nonhuman, and never-seen entity that was reputed to live in the bowels of the extinct volcano that also housed the Caverns. Very little was known about the Presence except that it was there — and that it subtly affected the behavior of those who lived within the margins of its environment. There was a theory that the Presence actually generated the stability of the entire volcanic structure, and its proponents pointed tothe fact that the Caverns had no visible stasis generators. There was an even more elaborate scenario in which the Presence derived some strange alien gratification from the agonies and ecstasies of its mortal neighbors and used its influence to ease them toward the greatest possible excesses.

As in most things, there was an opposing school of thought. It maintained that the Presence did not exist at all: It was a collective wish fulfillment. The denizens of the Caverns had invented a sinister, lurking, but wholly fictitious demigod on which they could blame their worst indulgences.

The Minstrel Boy did not know if he believed in the Presence. When he thought about it, he imagined some malevolent liquid being, a flash of poison green reflection on a black sumpwater surface, way

down at the bottom of an infinitely deep shaft. If it existed, he was quite prepared to be afraid of it.

The Minstrel Boy crawled from the nest of furs and scarves and silk cushions and lay facedown on the chill, green polished stone of the floor. It felt good. Cyo and Yosee had exhausted him. Every muscle ached, and he was as limp as a wrung-out and discarded rag. Indeed, he had been discarded. The Minstrel Boy had no illusions about the way things were done in the Caverns. The two young girls were now engrossed in each other, vigorously coupling, minds disconnected and lithe bodies quivering and pumping, one skin pearlized and the other rainbow silver. The Minstrel Boy dragged himself a little farther to where cold water splashed into the shallow basin that had been carved in the floor. He dunked his head in it and shuddered, then looked up, trying to focus his eyes. If he did not get out of that place soon, he had no doubt that one way or another it would kill him.

He looked back at his two former companions, half-hidden in the furs and silks, showing just the momentary flash of an outflung arm or leg. He dunked his face in the water again and shook his head. Cyo and Yosee were too driven in their constant quest for the oblivion of sensuality to have any idea what was to come. When the Caverns slid into their season of honor, the gilded pair would undoubtedly become Victims.

Gradually, and with considerable groaning, he pushed himself into a sitting position and then, after a long pause, finally stood up. He stretched wearily and walked back to the cushions. He picked up a silk sheet and wrapped it around his hips, sarongstyle. The girls momentarily stopped what they were doing. It was an unexpected courtesy.

'Are you going?'

He nodded. 'Yeah, going.'

'Where are you going?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'For a stroll?'

The girls talked in rotation, asking alternating questions.

'Are you tired of us?'

The Minstrel Boy allowed himself a tired grin. 'You look like you can handle things on your own.'

'Are you coming back?'

'Maybe. Later.'

'We'll probably go to the Grand Hall later for the masque.'

'I don't think I could cope with the Grand Hall.'

'Are you getting ready to leave us, Minstrel Boy?'

Again he shrugged. 'Right now I'm just going for a walk.'

'The Presence doesn't like people leaving. It makes him sad.'

'I haven't said I'm leaving.'

'I think you're going to leave us.'

Cyo was the last one to speak. The Minstrel Boy found that he did not want to look her directly in the eye.

'If I do, I'm sure the Presence won't miss me.'

They were in a small side arbor just off the Curved Stairs, a romantic trysting place in a forest where the trees were carved from the living rock and a trompe l'oeil stream fed water into an artificial pool. Muted blue light filtered down through a canopy of basalt leaves and branches. It appeared to have been expressly designed for sexual liaison and very little else.

The Minstrel Boy, still wearing the silk sheet, stepped out into the brighter light of the stairs. The Curved Stairs were an awe-inspiring helix of wide stone steps that dropped through some hundred vertical feet, spiraling around the outside of the volcano's central shaft. It was one of the main human thoroughfares in the Presence's domain. There was a certain amount of debate as to the exact nature of the Presence's volcano. More than a few maintained that the mountain had no true exterior, that the nothings simply started at a set average rock depth beyond the interior surface. Certainly the Minstrel Boy had never met anyone who claimed to have been on the outside. The onlyroute he knew about by which travelers could come in and out of the Caverns was on a submarine shuttle, along the sea tunnels that ran through the roots of the volcano and down to a stasis-generated disjointed sea. The counterargument was a fairly primitive one: What had an inside had, by definition, to have an outside. The Minstrel Boy could not accept that. He knew for a fact that such axioms had no validity in a universe where logic had been replaced by kinetic paradox. It was one of a long list of things he did his best not to think about.

The outside of the volcano might have been the subject of debate, but the inside was absolute in its extravagant reality. There was no question that it was unique in its baroque magnificence. Every surface in the miles of tunnels, stairways, caverns, and bridges was shaped, polished, and carved into an infinity of patterns that ranged from sweeping abstracts to lunging, prancing reliefs of huge mythical beasts. Massive stalagmites were fashioned into three-dimensional depictions of the gargantuan congress of giant pornographic demons. Flying bridges arched like the wings of eagles across apparently bottomless caverns, while the smooth curves of lava flows became the stomachs and thighs of nude basalt sirens. The overwhelming impact of the endless carvings was enhanced, if indeed that was possible, by shifting beams of lights that zigzagged from polished surface to polished surface. Eruptions of natural steam were reminders of a wild

volcanic past, and a system of constantly running water that punctuated the relentless stone with fountains, waterfalls, deep cisterns, and mirror-smooth pools provided a constant liquid counterpoint to the man-made music of the place.

The Minstrel Boy started up the wide expanse of the Curved Stairs. His private chamber, where he kept the few possessions he had brought with him when he had fled the outside and where he went when he wanted to think or sleep alone, was high in the upper levels of the Caverns. He took the climb slowly. The steps of the Curved Stairs were not particularly steep, but there were a great many of them. He passed a young man, emaciated body covered with a patina of grime, sitting motionless with his back against the outer wall. He was staring vacantly at a point somewhere about three feet in front of him. He was either discorporate or completely mindless — to the observer there was very little difference — and it was quite possible that he had beenin the same position for days. It was also possible that he would remain as he was until he simply faded into death. In recent days, the Minstrel Boy had seen a number of similar motionless figures.

A young couple was walking down the stairs toward him, arm in arm; they were both exceptionally fair. Their straight blond hair hung almost to their waists, and they were naked except for the dense garlands of roses that were woven around their necks. He could see flecks of blood where the thorns had pierced their chalk-white skin. They were another typical indication of the changing season. Even sensuality was becoming a matter of solemnity and pain.

The Minstrel Boy's chamber was off a corridor, the entrance to which was the gaping maw of a multieyed dragon that seemed to be screaming either in rage or in some unimaginable agony. At the far end there were flights of Escher stairs that appeared to defy both reason and gravity. It was an out-of-the-way part of the Caverns, and he rarely saw anyone on the impossible stairs. On this day, however, he spotted four other figures, their shoulders hunched into long back cloaks that gave them a decidedly sinister look. On each cloak, over the heart, was an insignia of a golden sword. The Minstrel Boy immediately recognized the emblem; it was a very bad sign. The Society of Hunters should not have been active quite so soon in the Caverns' emotional autumn.

There were no doors in the Caverns. Only transients like the Minstrel Boy had individual possessions. Those who had made the black volcano their permanent home shared everything with an uncaring and uncomplicated innocence. If a person did not want anyone entering his private chamber while he was out, he simply placed a thin copper baton in the floor of the entrance. The symbol

was always respected.

With a sigh the Minstrel Boy sat down on the chamber's narrow bed. He was disgusted with himself. He had been seduced so completely, sinking like a drowning lemming into mat loose lotus world where past and future, will or manifest destiny, meant nothing. Tactile gratification was all. For far too long he had been absolutely content to drift in a dreaming present on the slow tide of wine and roses.

He could not say that he particularly missed past, future, will, or manifest destiny, but if he was truthful, he had to admit thatfor a while he had been feeling the kind of immobilizing lethargy that was the first watchtower warning of boredom. It had been easy to ignore the distress signals when the present had been an unending opium chaos of warm, indolent bodies, but now that he could feel the future's cold breath, he had to read the writing. Reluctantly he stood up, crossed the chamber, and peered into the small mirror that was mounted on the far wall. 'You look a mess, boy. You really look a mess.' The kohl around his eyes had run, emphasizing the dark circles of dissolute exhaustion. Even his hair looked dead, and the dyed streaks in the dark curls simply looked ridiculous. He pointed an accusing finger at his own reflection.

'Time was, you were a hard man, boy. Freebooter musician poet — a DNA Cowboy, no less. Remember all the stories? All those rough, tough tales of stomping moonshine madness? Hell, boy, people stepped aside when you came strutting by.' He sighed. 'Now look at you; you're shot to shit.'

It was the truth. Once-hard eyes were filmed over from too much Dreamsleep. His cheeks were sunken, his mouth had gone slack and soft, and even his chin seemed to have weakened and receded.

'You're turning into some raddled old funboy.'

He knew that he could not delay any longer. The time had come to make the break. He knew himself well enough to realize that even though he had not been consciously admitting it, he had come up to his chambers to wash off the makeup, pack his belongings, and dress for the outside. Mercifully, he had so few things that packing was a short and simple process. His changes of clothing and other odds and ends were swept into the battered Samtron foldaway that, when activated, would render them weightless and virtually without mass by parking them on a tether in some nearby subdimension. The Crom Magnum veetar was placed carefully in its armored case, and the antitheft system was put on-line. With a private solemnity, the Minstrel Boy pulled on his travel-stained leathers. He suddenly felt older, larger, and infinitely more tired but, in a sense, relieved. He inspected the transformation in the mirror. He took a deep breath and

squared his shoulders. What the hell? This was what he was supposed to be. He was not cut out to be an Eloi, and anyway, the Morlocks were coming. At least he had the consolation of knowing that he was doing what he had to do.

'Let's get the hell out of here.'

There were just two items left on the bed — his gun and his stasis generator. He picked up the nickel-plated, custom-channeled Colt.45 auto with the butt-mounted laser. It felt strange to hold a gun after so long. Even the thought of its compact totality was out of place in the lotus world. It was a confirmation that he was going to places where the dangers were different. The Colt was the best piece he had ever owned. Back in Dogbreath, he had paid old Abu Christmas a small fortune for the template. He eased it into the back waistband of his old leather pants and dropped the two spare clips of C-Face explodables into the pocket of his jacket.

He picked up the portable stasis generator and carefully checked the function lights. The SG, just slightly larger than a paper book, was what made it possible to travel at all in the Damaged World. He attached it to the clips on his belt. The unit produced a limited stasis field that extended just a few inches beyond the wearer's body and enabled him or her to survive deep in the nonmatter of the nothings. Without an SG, or if one suddenly malfunctioned in the middle of the nothings, the human body, and any other solid object, for that matter, went through a process that looked like high-speed evaporation and instantly became one with the non.

The Minstrel Boy felt strange walking down the staircases of the Caverns in full outside dress, veetar case over his back and the foldaway floating at his heel. Stares followed him as he descended into the depths of the volcano, but no one spoke to him or tried to stop him. The others seemed to accept his leaving as his own business, act of a lunatic though it may have been. At least, that was how it seemed until he was walking past the Starfex Fountain and was almost to the head of the shaft that led down to the sea tunnels.

'You, Minstrel Boy!'

The authoritative female voice rang around the vaulted, marble-faced dome that housed the fountain. The Minstrel Boy stopped in his tracks. One rarely heard voices like that in the Caverns. The foldaway obediently halted beside him. He slowly turned. There were three of them, all in the black cloaks with the golden sword emblem over the heart. In the center was the woman who had spoken. She was tall and handsome, with slightly grayed hair. He had seen her quite recently, holding her own at orgies. Now she looked like the fanatic agent of some dark, fierce god. The hood of her cloak was thrown back, and her eyes flashed with a dangerous madness. Her companions were

both male. Their faces were covered by their cowls, and the one to her left had a small opalsnake coiled around his wrist. The Minstrel Boy did not like it at all.

'You're talking to me?'

Her voice was formal. 'You have been chosen by the Society of Hunters. You have been designated a Victim in the Games.'

So the discontent had started. The black-cloaked Hunters advanced on him. The woman was holding out a wafer of transparent crystal. The Minstrel Boy stood his ground.

'You're wasting your time. I'm history. I'm long gone. I'm no longer part of your Games or anything else.'

'Accept your plaque.'

'I've already told you, I'm out of here.'

'Accept your plaque.'

'Goddamn it!' In a flash of anger he snatched the thing and hurled it to the ground, where it shattered into tiny jagged shards. For an instant he thought about pulling out the Colt and blasting all three of them. It would probably make the Caverns a better place. His anger was rusty, however, and swiftly cooled. 'I'm leaving, you understand?'

'We cannot stop you leaving — that would infringe the Articles. But you have accepted the plaque, and you will eventually be found.'

The Minstrel Boy pointed to the shards on the ground. 'I've smashed your damned plaque.'

'That makes no difference. You will eventually be found.'

'Eventually can be a long time.'

He turned on his heel and marched to the head of the shaft. Yeah, sure. A bunch of crazies in cloaks were going to reach out across the nothings and get him. He would not hold his breath. Behind him, the foldaway accelerated to catch up. Very much later he would bitterly regret that he had not killed those three when he had first thought of it. It would have saved a great deal of trouble.

The shaft opened on the smell of salt air and ozone. In a cathedral of a rough-hewn cavern, granite quays jutted into a dark tossing swell that lapped over their worn sides. Saint Elmo's fire glowed on the walls as if to suggest that somewhere deep in the bowels of the volcano there was a major interface of opposing forces. Six submarines rode at their mooring lines. There was one large, sleek passenger shuttle and five much smaller five-seaters with their much more ornate custom designs. There were no people in evidence. There was little traffic to and from the domain of the Presence, and the docks of the sea tunnels were not a place where lovers cared to linger. Technically, he was about to steal a submarine, but theft had little meaning in a culture where people were so apathetic about property concepts.

Thus it came as something of a surprise when, while he was standing on the dock inspecting a gold five-seater with a satyr figurehead and a fish-scale design on its ceramic hull, he heard a voice calling out to him.

'Hey, you!'

After his brush with the Society of Hunters, he was wary of people yelling after him. He swung around to see a woman running toward him, moving awkwardly on high-heeled sandals. Her skin was very white, and her hair was a very black and tangled mane. The black lace shift that was her only garment scarcely qualified her as dressed.

'Will you take me with you?'

'I'm not going on any joyride.'

Up close, he could see that she had a narrow, pretty face with very large, bright green eyes and otherwise small even features. Her expression was determined.

She gave him an impatient look. 'I can see that. You're getting out of here, right?'

The Minstrel Boy was cautious. His old instinct of self-preservation, which had slept all through the wine and roses, was coming awake again. 'I'm leaving, yes.'

'I want to leave, too. I'd take a sub myself, but I don't know how to navigate to somewhere else. You know how to navigate?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'Yeah, I can navigate.'

'So let me come along for the ride.'

The Minstrel Boy looked her up and down. 'You're hardly dressed for traveling.'

She planted her hands on her hips. Her body was full and magnificent. 'Hey, boy, as you well know, the Hunters are running around up above designating Victims for the upcomingfestivities and handing out the crystal tickets. I didn't bother to pack. I figure that I can take care of a wardrobe when we get wherever you're going.'

'There's no way of knowing what we might run into out there. The shit changes all the time.'

The woman sniffed. 'I know my way around.'

The Minstrel Boy looked a little sad at her display of machismo. 'Lady, nobody knows their way around these days.'

She faced him with the defiance of one who was truly desperate. 'So I'll fake it and be just like everybody else.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned. She sure as hell had the glands. He could not see any valid reason why he should not have a traveling companion. She was certainly very attractive, and she might even develop a sense of gratitude along the way. He made a mock-defeated gesture. 'It'd be a pleasure to ride with you. Which boat do you fancy?

I was thinking about taking this gold one.'

The woman shrugged. 'It doesn't make any difference to me.'

He hand-cranked the hatch and climbed into the well of the submarine. He offered his hand to the woman. 'Welcome aboard, milady. Do you have a name?'

'Renatta de Luxe.'

He winced. 'Really?'

'Of course not, but it'll do for the duration. I mean, what kind of name is the Minstrel Boy?'

'You know me?'

'I've seen you around. I even saw you play once, back when you still bothered to play.'

The vessel rolled with the swell, and for a moment they were thrown against each other. Then it rolled the other way, and they were apart again. The Minstrel Boy smiled and indicated that she should precede him into the cabin. The interior of the craft was cramped but comfortable. It was finished in walnut paneling, and the passenger seats were swivel armchairs covered in deep plush. On one wall there was a small compact bar and supply locker that he intended to investigate once the vessel was on autopilot. He eased into the transparent bow blister and settled into the pilot chair. The submarine was powered down, and he started the preembarkation by stroking his hand over the plasma control sphere to bring the ship to life. Lights softlyglowed, and there was a comforting hum from the engine compartment in the stern. A ready image from the boatmind rose to his eye level. He ran a fast cockpit check. The five-seat submarine was not a particularly complicated piece of machinery. The most important thing was to locate the lizardbrain navigator. To his relief, he spotted the silicate cube that contained the microscopic sliver of tissue from the primary brain of the female marma lizard.

'We're in business. We have lizardbrain.'

Renatta de Luxe had settled into a passenger chair directly behind him and strapped in, her manner indicating that she wanted him to be aware that she knew what she was doing.

'How does that work?' she asked.

'Don't even think about it.'

The marma lizard was the only creature that had the natural power to sense routes through the nothings from one point of stability to the next. In the early days of travel through the nothings, in the time of the great arks, numbers of the large lizards had had to be taken on any voyage. Travel through nonmatter had been greatly facilitated by the discovery that cognizance could be achieved by any vessel's basic biode if a few cells of one of the lizards' brains were grafted into its code.

The Minstrel Boy had a secret that he tried never to reveal to anyone. He could achieve cognizance himself — he, too, knew his way through the nothings. Years ago he had received the now largely outlawed lizardbrain implant. But using it was not an experience he had ever relished. The sense of knowing where he was or where he was headed came only after massive doses of the drug cyclatrol and was accompanied by agonizing pain. Although there had been incidents when ruthless individuals had forced the secret out of him and compelled him to navigate for them at gunpoint or worse, he tried to limit its use to the most dire emergencies only.

'So where are we going?'

He glanced back at Renatta de Luxe as he brought down the periscope and slipped the moorings. 'I don't know yet. I have to get beyond the stasis wash of this place and then see what I can tune to. This little boat doesn't have unlimited range. It'd be good if you didn't talk to me for a bit. I'm going to go into the biode until we're out of the sea tunnels.'

The power levers were in front of him. The grips were polished copper, lubed for a nearly perfect contact. He grasped them, and his nervous system performed a tiny sashay as it was accepted into the biode's intelligence cushion. His vision changed. The walls of the cavern and the sea tunnel glowed with a soft phosphor, as did the underwater contours, all clearly visible through the craft's now seemingly transparent hull. He leaned into the levers, and the craft moved forward. Speed, attitude, power consumption — all the figures were in his head. He willed the boat to go where he wanted, and it went. He willed quite sedately at first, submerging as soon as the bottom dropped away from the dock and then easing the nose into the mouth of the sea tunnel. The first narrow tube, however, quickly opened out into a network of interconnecting undersea chambers. He could guide the submarine and still take in the view. Giant stone arrows carved in the rock wall indicated the way to the open sea. The Minstrel Boy could not shake the feeling that he was passing through a vast aquarium. The sea tunnels of the Presence teemed with marine life that was as bizarre and exotic as the human life up in the Caverns, and in his biode-enhanced vision each creature glowed with its own eerie light. Fat, well-fed sharks glided with lazy menace. Strange life-forms with trailing fronds and eyes that protruded on stalks peered into the bubble canopy. The Minstrel Boy realized that Renatta de Luxe, without the biode-enhanced vision, could not see any of it.

He flicked on the external lights. 'Take a look through the porthole.'

'What are these things?'

'Who the hell knows.'

'Can I talk to you again?'

'Not yet.'

The submarine moved silently on with its lights blazing. The walls of the cavern outside continued to open out until they were no longer there. The Minstrel Boy took his hands off the power levers.

'We're in the open sea.'

'What happens next?'

'We'll drift into the nothings.'

'Will we feel the transition?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'I doubt it. Not unless the stasis generator goes down. I doubt we'd feel anything even then.'

As if to emphasize his point, lights on the control panel flashed and a warning appeared in the air:

IT IS TIME TO MANUALLY ACTIVATE THE STASIS GENERATOR.

It was a tradition: Human beings activated the stasis generator. One did not leave it to biodes or hard control systems or anything else. Of course, those things could provide backup if the human screwed up, but a man was the master of his own means of survival. The Minstrel Boy hit the twin toggles. The warning changed to a status display:

STASIS FIELD UP.

The nothings came at them like a wall of fog beneath the sea. They glittered with a bright and very alien light. They seemed to swirl with a thousand colors, but it was impossible to focus on an individual color or a single movement. There was something about them that resisted the grasp of the human senses. The gold submarine slid into them. The nonmatter closed over the bubble canopy and the portholes. There was a sheen on the outside of the craft from the thin layer of water that the stasis generator maintained around the craft. The lights continued to blaze, but the beams went nowhere.

> *It was unfortunate timing, to say the least. Just as the news of the Great Metaphysical Breakthrough was bringing a strange hope to the beleaguered Thirteenth Empire, the nothings appeared and swiftly devoured reality as the humans had known it, except what little could be saved by the hastily developed stasis generators. Human reasoning, being what it was, found it impossible to separate cause from juxtaposition and to dismiss the idea that the two events were related. The enemies of the*

metaphysicians made great play of this, openly accusing them of unleashing the demon.

A survivor of the destruction of Climnestra described one of the first appearances of the nothings thus: 'It started on Philo Boulevard right outside the Harbingers. It was a glittering patch of air, like dancing dust motes, that hung some four feet above the street. Very slowly it grew into a dazzling, pulsing sphere some six feet across. It remained like that for maybe ten minutes, and then, without warning, it expanded at an amazing speed. Everything it touched smoked and became nothing. Even those of us who were lucky enough to be inside the field of the stasis generator feared that we would parish as the terrible miasma engulfed us, but the ground beneath our feet and the air around us remained, and we alone were spared.'

The theories regarding the origins of the nothings are many, and the debate continues among historians to this day. Initially they were blamed on some alien superweapon, a product of the conflict with the Draan. Later more fanciful and complex explanations were evolved. The nothings were the first phase of a cataclysmic matter/nonmatter evolution. They were a uniquely disastrous residue from the process of stuff synthesis. One particular favorite of metaphysicians, trying to divert attention from the accusations of their political foes, was that humanity itself, fleeing the potential created by the Great Metaphysical Breakthrough, had willed The nothings into existence as a form of perverse self-protection. They were the physical (or maybe counterphysical) manifestation of collective fear and depression. There was also the matter of their extent. For those

who survived the destruction, it was impossible to tell whether the nothings had engulfed just their home planet or half the galaxy.

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTERTWO

Theyhad their backs to the nothings, and the Captain had taken away their stasis generators. There was no point turning back. Reave Mekonta leaned forward in his high-pommeled saddle and patted the green scales of his charger. The heavy lizard snuffled and grunted. The animal behind blew through its nostrils, and all down the line other animals made the soft sounds of big reptile discontent; their pungent smell tainted the clear air. Harnesses jingled, and up ahead there was the hum of the armored car's drive and the crunch of its roller treads. The small army of Vlad Baptiste, who liked to be referred to as "the Torch," moved cautiously along the road that led down into the small town.

The charger fluttered its wattles. The beasts were uncomfortable. The fully mature male marma lizard was so aggressively stupid that it would charge headlong into anything, but it did not take kindly to a slow pace and a short rein. The army of Vlad Baptiste boasted twenty marma chargers, plus the same number of horsemen, and five scouts riding the cognizant female lizards — although the scouts stayed out of the bulk of the fighting. There was also the armored car of Baptiste himself and the attendant foot soldiers and baggage train.

They had come out of the nothings onto high ground. They were in an alpine pass looking down at a long narrow valley with a small fast-flowing river running through it. The small valley town that was situated about halfway down its length was not much more than a collection of domes and flat-topped adobes. It was neoprimitive from the look of the surrounding cultivated fields, and the small, gray stone ziggurat beside the river at the far end of the town seemed to indicate that religion played a major part in the inhabitants' lives. They would most likely be pushovers, which was just as well — for this attack, the army had no air support. The air pirates who had been running with them for the past two months had decided that the valley was too narrow for them to operate in safely and had taken their dirigible and four small monoplanes and headed out for Elsewhere. Whether they would ever return was debatable. Baptiste had fumed, but he had no real control over the miniature air force.

The army of Vlad Baptiste had emerged from the nothings into a subjective early morning. A pseudosun was coming up from behind the blue mountains. The upper slopes were hidden by clouds; Reave, who had seen a hundred variations of that kind of insular stasis town, suspected that the clouds were probably a permanent fixture, hiding the fact that the mountains had no real peaks but simply faded into the upper extreme nothings. There was undoubtedly a spread feed

generator buried somewhere under the town, maintaining the valley's cozy normality.

Baptiste had briefly halted the column at the head of the pass. For some minutes he had sat on the turret of the armored car, a hunched figure in a leather field coat with his white aviator scarf flying in the breeze. He had stared down at the town long and hard, as though savoring the carnage to come. Finally he had pulled down his goggles and waved the army forward. There was little doubt among his soldiers that their leader was mad. His taste for random and wanton destruction seemed to grow by the month. There was no reason to sack and burn the little mountain community beyond the simple fact that it was there and Baptiste had found it. Reave was becoming heartily sick of the whole bloody business. He would have liked just to leave and ride away on his own, but that was a good deal more difficult than it sounded. Lately Baptiste had started hanging deserters.

There had once been a time when the word "deserter" would have been quite meaningless. They had been a loose company of freebooters then. Admittedly, they had been a little wild and some of their number had definitely been psychopaths, but they had largely confined their activities to the Lanfranc Margins, where everything was pretty wild and woolly, and, if they messed with anyone, the victims were more than likely to give as good as they got. The normal thing was to ride into town, get drunk, raise a little hell, and move on. It was simple, and those who got hurt probably deserved it. At first the change was so gradual that nobody really noticed. The gang became larger, growing from a dozen to twenty and then to thirty. Baptiste seemed to be making most of the decisions. He even organized a kind of uniform. He somehow acquired a load of short, frogged hussar's jackets in federal gray, and everyone got to wear one. Each man made his own modifications. Not even Baptiste could expect regimentation among his motley, walleyed bunch. Reave wore his with a plumed hat and black thighboots. Menlo Welker, who rode beside him, had his hair in braids and sported a steel pot helmet with a bayonet blade welded to it, pointing straight up.

The turning point had come when they had burned Lovelock Springs after a protracted firefight with angry townspeople who did not particularly relish their rough brand of tourism. After that, Baptiste seemed to have had the taste in his mouth. They stopped being mere hell-raisers and became destroyers. Baptiste started talking about "his army," and instead of having fun, they went on "raids." The Margin towns began arming against them, hiring shootists from other nomad gangs as mercenaries to defend them against Baptiste and his constantly growing band of cutthroats. Their raids took them farther

and farther afield, and soon they were regularly leaving their old stomping grounds in the Margins and making sweeps through the nothings, preying on unsuspecting and usually undefended stasis settlements like the one in front of them.

The town seemed to be slowly waking to the new day. Thin ribbons of smoke drifted up from a number of the buildings. They really did have to be neoprimitive if they insisted on using fires for cooking. At first nobody in the town seemed to notice the body of men coming down the road from the pass. A few figures came and went among the buildings, but their movements had the calm normalcy of any daily routine. Nobody seemed to have looked up at the mountain. Then the routine was abruptly shattered. It took only one to give the alarm. The one was walking across the small square in front of the ziggurat. He or she stopped dead in his or her tracks. It was impossible to see the face or even determine the sex, but the reaction was unmistakable. First the shock and then the response. The figure ran to the nearest building and quickly returned with four others. They were pointing.

Menlo grunted. 'Looks like we've been spotted.'

'We're kinda hard to miss.' Reave's mouth twisted.

Figures were spilling out of buildings all over. Some were running toward the far end of town, but one large group, emerging from a big, barnlike building near the ziggurat, was forming into orderly ranks. They wore what looked like green sleeveless tunics and were carrying weapons.

'They've got themselves some sort of militia, damn it.' The figures in green were reinforced by a number of regular townspeople.

'And they're planning to make a fight of it.'

'I don't think they know who they're dealing with.'

There was a dry stone wall, three or four feet high, around the perimeter. The defenders were running toward it, obviously planning to use it as cover from which to hold off the attackers. Reave knew that his own bunch was going to take casualties and that Baptiste's response would probably be the massacre of everyone in the town. He drew one of his two pistols from the holster on his saddle. It was a long-barreled flintlock, lavishly ornamented, a reproduction of an ancient Moorish design. The antiquity, however, was only on the outside. The weapon's operation was deadly state of the art. A subatomic pellet discharged a stream of lethal accelerated ions each time the trigger was pulled. He checked the pistol's charge, then replaced it and ran a check on its twin.

The pitch of the armored car's drive changed. It was revving and picking up speed. Its siren cut in. The captain shouted 'Charge!' and Reave put long roweled spurs to his charger. The advance was a

practiced maneuver. The lead riders moved sideways until the whole mounted force was strung out, yelling like banshees, running line abreast while the foot soldiers sprinted behind them.

Despite their bulk, the marma lizards could cover ground at alarming speed. They ran with a high-stepping, roadrunner gait, their long, pointed tails ramrod-stiff behind them and level with the ground. The pounding of their clawed feet shook the earth. The defenders had reached the stone wall. Reave had to give them full credit for courage. It would have been quite understandable if they had fled in the face of the attackers' demented charge. There were flashes of green fire from along the wall's length. They had to be using some kind of crystal-based particle weapon. So they were not that neoprimitive; they were not fighting with bows and boomerangs. A marma was hit. It staggered headfirst into the ground and crashed on its back, crushing its rider. Reeve stuffed the reins of his mount into his mouth to free his hands to use both pistols.

The armored car was raking the wall with a heat ray. Reave could imagine the defenders crouching behind the stones as the roaring washes of flame lashed over their heads. Then there was a blinding flash, and a twenty-foot section of wall vanished into a smoking crater. The armored car had tossed a nukeling. Baptiste was ever the one to crush gnats with a hammer, Reave reflected. It was extremely lucky that Stuff Central had imposed an absolute prohibition on the templates for weapons of real mass destruction, or without a doubt Baptiste would have committed holocaust on a grand scale and his body count would have risen to truly astronomical figures. He would have smashed stars if he had had the means. The limits on his viciousness were strictly a matter of available technology.

The nearest riders converged on the gap in the stone wall. Reave was one of them. Once through the gap, he hauled his charger around to go after the defenders who were still crouching behind the wall. Then he was in among them. Menlo was beside him, hacking with an ancient cavalry saber that he kept honed to a razor edge. Reave found himself in the seemingly timeless chaos of close combat. He was fighting on instinct, and the world was coming at him in vivid, threatening visual flashes. The noise was so dense that it was akin to silence. A burly militiaman in a green jerkin grabbed for his left stirrup, looking to unseat him from the lizard. Without an instant's hesitation, Reave blew the top of the man's head off. At his right, another man was raising a weapon, a smooth blast tube with an ornate polymer stock. Reave fired again and again. Firepower was the raiders' watchword: Just keep firing. His pistol made a continuous high-pitched roar.

The defenders were determined, but they were no match for

Baptiste's savages. After a few furious minutes of desperate hand-to-hand fighting, they broke and ran. Most were cut down by pursuing riders. Menlo seemed to be taking a barbarous delight in lopping off the heads of the fleeing defenders. Then he changed his trick. He hung low in his saddle and slashed open a running man's stomach. The man's intestines spilled out and tripped him. The entire column pounded down the main street of the town, pouring indiscriminate fire into the buildings and scattering terrified people before them. The riders shot at anything in their field of fire: men, women, or children. The slaughter was nothing more than a mindless frenzy, and it would probably last through the rest of the day, or longer if they came across a cache of native alcohol. On their tall reptiles, their weapons flashing, the riders must have looked like demons from the pit.

The column wheeled on the square in front of the ziggurat and started back down the street on a second pass. Already three buildings were burning, and there was a definite lack of readily available targets. Some riders had to make do with merely trampling the bodies that were lying in the dust. Then there was a flash of green fire from the roof of a small adobe. Someone was foolhardy enough to still be fighting back. The weapons of half the column came to bear on the spot, and the small flat-roofed structure was quickly reduced to nibble.

After a good deal of aimless milling about, riders started dismounting. Pickets held the mounts while the rest began a methodical house-by-house clearing of the town. Foot soldiers were dispatched into the surrounding fields to hunt down any inhabitants who might be hiding out there. Reave was content to remain in the street and hang on to the reins of his charger along with those of Menlo and another man while they joined in the house-to-house combing for booty and victims. Reave was beginning to feel sickened. As he wrestled with the lizards, which still had their wattles up and were ready to go, Baptiste's armored car rolled to a stop beside him. The driver, Gord, a squat sociopath with hulking shoulders and a blankly brutal frog face, swung down from the armored car and was pulling on the backtanks of a flamethrower. Soon he would be hosing liquid phosphorus into any building that took his fancy.

Although there were regular outbursts of gunfire, the intent was not an immediate, wholesale massacre of the population. Baptiste liked to have a few prisoners to play with. A makeshift pen was set up on the square, and title townspeople who had been unfortunate enough to have been taken alive were forced to squat on the ground, guarded by a dozen foot soldiers. There were raucous shouts from back down the street. Someone had discovered the town brewery.

Up to that point no raider had attempted to enter the ziggurat. Anything that had a connection to metaphysics was reserved for

Baptiste himself. He had an intense and all-encompassing hatred of anything to do with the spiritual, an attitude that Reave considered a little incongruous in a man who was so fascinated by death. Baptiste stepped down from the armored car and stood staring at the ziggurat. Reave had to admit that the guy had style. He was short but compensated for it by constant nervous aggression. He was the classic little dictator, and his stance as he looked at the ziggurat was typical. His boots were planted in the dirt in a manner that indicated to the world that he was ready for anything it cared to throw at him. He looked tough and weather-beaten. His long leather coat was dusty and stained. The perennial goggles had left permanent marks on both sides of his jutting nose. With Napoleonic understatement, his only concession to any kind of battlefield dandyism was the flowing aviator scarf and a collection of small gold trinkets on a chain around his neck. He wore a second short flight jacket under the long coat. His hands were clasped determinedly behind his back, but the solid certainty of the stance was betrayed by fingers that were in constant motion.

Baptiste nodded to himself as though he had made some sort of decision. Looking neither left nor right, he started walking toward the ziggurat. He seemed transfixed. A number of men fell in behind him. Reave decided that he would go, too. He wanted to see the inside of the thing on the square. The lizards had calmed down, and he handed the reins to a foot soldier. With his pistols stuck in his belt, he strode after Baptiste.

Only five men actually mounted the steps to the ziggurat: Baptiste himself; Reave; a horseman called Yar Gracka; the Old Metal Monster, one of the originals in Baptiste's army; and I-shiire, who kept his face veiled in the manner of the Nulites. The remainder of Baptiste's followers hung back. Despite their absolute callousness in most things, the nomad raiders had a certain reserve when confronted by the metaphysical. It was not a matter of belief or even fear. In the Damaged World, belief was wholly relative. Metaphysics was something that most of the army did not understand and thus did not care to mess with. They left it to the fanatics like Baptiste and I-shiire the Nulite or to the inquisitive like Reave and the Old Metal Monster.

The flight of stone steps ran straight and very steep almost a third of the way up the structure. The pseudosun was well into the sky, and the day was getting warm. The Old Metal Monster, who weighed some four hundred pounds, was panting and red-faced, sweating into his steel armor. Reave wondered what they would discover at the end of the climb. One could never tell with religion. The shrine might hold some inexplicable piece of technology or a sacrificial altar crusted with the blood of centuries.

The first thing they found was a set of imposing bronze doors, ten feet high and looking as though they weighed several tons each. They were ornamented with coiling serpents and the double helix symbol enclosed by a seven-pointed star. Baptiste pushed back his goggles and pulled off his gauntlets. Without a word, he handed the gloves to Yar Gracka and placed his bare hands flat on the metal, as though he were trying to sense some kind of vibration. It seemed to Reave that Baptiste's behavior was getting stranger and stranger. After a few moments he flexed his arms as though trying to push the doors open. They refused to yield. The other men joined him, applying their shoulders, but still the doors would not move. Baptiste stepped back. He motioned to I-shiire. The Nulite reached under his burnoose and produced a tiny shaped limpet change. Nulites attached great significance to the act of blowing things up. According to their violently relentless faith, any explosion was a symbol of the Primal Birth. The explosion was not to be, however. Just as I-shiire was placing the charge on the hairline division between the two doors, they made a noise like a deep sigh and slowly swung back.

It was dark inside the ziggurat, and for the first few steps the raiders were quite blind. Reave pulled out his pistols. The other men also had weapons in their hands. Gradually their eyes became accustomed to the gloom. There seemed to be a soft radiance coming from above them. It was the first time Reave could remember seeing Baptiste look hesitant. They were in a large square room. A shaft of sunlight came in behind them, as much of an intruder as they were. As far as Reave could tell, the room was a perfect cube. That was the first problem: The room was too big. There was no way the place could be accommodated by the outside dimensions of the structure. It was a physical impossibility. If anything, it should have come to a point that corresponded with the pyramid peak of the ziggurat.

Yar Gracka scanned the room for any lurking threat, 'Shift-space?'

The Old Metal Monster scowled. 'It's a damned reality twist. I hate religions. They always pull shit like this.'

The second problem was the large stone cube that floated in the exact center of the space with no visible means of support. Baptiste slowly paced around it, gazing up with his hands clasped behind his back. In the half-light he had the face of an angry hawk. Hard, crazy eyes were bright above the curved, jutting nose, and thick sensual lips were curled in an expression of total contempt.

'Is this supposed to impress me? Do they think I'm some ignorant native who can be intimidated by party tricks?'

He seemed to take everything about the ziggurat very personally. Reave noticed, though, that Baptiste refrained from actually walking under the floating block of stone. Instead, he shouted furiously into

the echoing space.

'So where are you, priests, or whatever you call yourselves?'

He stood and waited, but there was no response of any kind. He interlaced his fingers and flexed his wrists.

'So, priests, you want to play hide-and-seek, do you? I have a much better idea. I'm going outside, and I'm going to hang what's left of your parish, one at a time, until you decide to show yourselves. How do you like that, priests?' He looked at the Old Metal Monster. 'Build a gallows for me, Monster.'

The Old Metal Monster nodded. His expression was grim, but his small pig eyes gleamed at the prospect of a multiple hanging. 'Right away, chief.'

As he turned to walk back through the bronze doors, the burnished surface of his armor was suddenly alive with dancing flashes of purple energy like a plasma discharge or sudden isolated static. Although the flashes did not appear to be causing him any harm, the Old Metal Monster started frantically to try to brush them off as though they were crawling insects.

'Damn this, I'm getting out of here.'

As he stumbled back into the outside light, the flashes vanished as abruptly as they had appeared. The others gathered around him on the steps outside the door.

'Are you all right?'

The Old Metal Monster nodded uncertainly. He looked plenty shaken. 'I guess so.'

'What was that stuff?'

'Some filthy priest trick?'

Baptiste's eyes were hard. 'You all heard what I said in there, so let's get to it.'

A makeshift gallows was hastily erected, and Baptiste personally looked over the prisoners to select the first victim. He picked a thickset man with graying hair who looked to be some kind of town dignitary. As three foot soldiers dragged him out of the depressed mass of surviving townspeople, the man struggled and shouted, begging to be told what he and the other people had ever done to deserve the treatment they were receiving. No answer was forthcoming, and once they had him standing on the tall four-legged stool with the noose around his neck, he seemed to go limp, as though he had resigned himself to death. Baptiste walked forward and, without a word, kicked away the stool. The man dropped less than two feet, and the rope failed to break his neck. He hung twisting and choking with his feet barely inches off the ground. His face slowly turned blue, and a distended tongue protruded from lips that had puffed up to a dark purple.

Baptiste did not even wait for the first man to die before he chose a second sacrifice. This time it was a woman, plump and pink-cheeked, who looked as though she spent her time weeding her vegetable patch or milking her cow. When Baptiste pointed to her, she went white and them exploded into screaming hysteria. She had to be carried to the gallows, and the foot soldiers had trouble getting her to stand on the stool. Her legs seemed incapable of holding her up. The soldiers were about to dispense with the stool and haul her up bodily when a voice came from the top of the ziggurat.

'Stop this madness!'

A single figure had come out of the bronze doors. Baptiste waved to the men who were still trying to string up the choking, shrieking townswoman. 'Wait. Let her down. This looks like our elusive priest.'

The figure was male. It was hard to estimate his age. A fitted bodysuit, spotlessly white, showed that he had a well-developed muscular body, but his face was lined and venerable. A full head of straight white hair that fell to his shoulders was held in place by a thin gold chaplet. Reave suspected that somewhere back up the line the man must have had a longlife treatment. As he walked up to Baptiste and his henchmen, the contrast was scarcely believable. Beside the dirt and scars and stragglingbeards of the raiders, he was dazzling. A couple of soldiers actually took a step back as he came close.

Menlo leaned close to Reave. 'That's what you call an aura.'

Baptiste waited with his hands on his hips. 'So you're the priest of this wretched little town?'

The man in white regarded him calmly. 'I'm not a priest.'

'So what are you?'

'My name is Anaheim, and I'm a metaphysician.'

Baptiste sneered. 'You'll not metaphysic your way out of this, priest.'

'I've already told you that I'm not a priest.'

Baptiste stabbed an angry finger at the ziggurat. 'And what's that thing? Your house? It's a damned temple. You can't lie your way out of that,'

'The structure is an integral part of my work.'

It did not help that Anaheim was over a foot taller than Baptiste. The chief of the raiders puffed out his chest and did everything but stand on tiptoe to be intimidating.

'You've come face to face with Vlad Baptiste, whatever you are. Men call me the Torch, and I am death to all stinking priests.'

Even with the now-still body already hanging on the gallows, Anaheim did not seem at all afraid of Baptiste. All he did was nod, acknowledging what Baptiste had said.

'I can't say that I'm pleased to meet you, Vlad Baptiste. You must be massively insecure to have the need to create such destruction. I can only tell you again that I am not a priest. If anything, I'm a scientist.'

Baptiste's voice was a snake hiss. 'I also hang scientists.'

Metaphysician Anaheim shook his head. 'No, you can't hang me.'

He was not pleading for his life. It was a simple statement of fact. The silence that followed was eerie. Baptiste clearly could not believe what he was hearing.

'I. . can't hang you? I can do anything I like to you. The only limit to what I can do to you is my own imagination!'

Again Anaheim shook his head. 'All you can do to me is force me to do something now that I was planning to leave until later.'

'And what's that?'

'This.' Metaphysician Anaheim closed his eyes.

Baptiste lost patience. He turned to the Old Metal Monster. 'Hang him! I've had enough of this charade. Hang him slowly, then cut him down and burn him!'

Hard hands reached to seize Anaheim. The metaphysician suddenly crumpled to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. At first everyone assumed that he had fainted from fear. Baptiste kicked him hard in the ribs, his boot leaving a dirty mark on the previously spotless white bodysuit. The body moved, but only as though it were dead weight. There was no sign of life.

'Revive him! Wake him up and kill him!'

The Old Metal Monster bent over Anaheim. He put a hand inside the top of the metaphysician's bodysuit. 'He's dead.'

'Dead?'

'A former metaphysician.'

'What did he do? Die of fright?'

The Old Metal Monster straightened up. 'Sure didn't look like it to me.'

It sure did not look like that to Reave, either. He had seen a man die of fright. It had involved choking, shaking, and turning green in the face. This was something totally different. It was as though Anaheim had just vacated his body and was not planning to come back. It was a little like the act of discorporation, except that those who had mastered the technique invariably left their mortal bodies on hold, waiting for their eventual return. Anaheim appeared to have gone for good. Most of those who had witnessed the incident seemed to be thinking the same way as Reave. Later there would be stories of how, in the fraction of a second before he had collapsed, a tiny bright thing had left Anaheim's mouth and flown up into the air. Reave had not seen anything of the sort, and he was convinced that it was simply

a decoration of the tale, but the fact that the story was born at all gave strong indication of how the encounter with Anaheim was looked upon by the rank and file.

A black rage descended on Baptiste. He ordered Anaheim's body hung up on the gallows and mutilated. If the metaphysician did decide to return, he would not have much of a physical body to come back to. The Old Metal Monster wanted to know what to do with the woman.

'What woman?'

'The one we were trying to hang before he came out of wherever he was hiding.'

Baptiste made an angry, impatient gesture. 'So hang her. Hang the whole lot of them if you've got a mind to.'

It proved to be a long hot afternoon of smoke, yellow dust, screams, and drunken fighting. In addition to the brewery, the raiders had also smashed their way into what turned out to be the local distillery and discovered over two hundred bottles of a fiercely potent single malt. With whiskey fire in their bellies, the army of Vlad Baptiste became really creative. A group of riders dragged some of the remaining townspeople out to the edge of town, to a spot some fifty yards from the stone wall. One by one the prisoners were turned loose with orders to try to escape over the wall. Then, betting among themselves on how far each one would get before he or she was gunned down, the drunken raiders started blasting away with howls of drunken laughter. Even the promise that anyone who actually made it all the way over the wall would be spared was a cruel deception. The two who did were rounded up again and forced to face some fresh horror.

Baptiste had his large battle tent set up beside the gallows, on the square in front of the ziggurat. He took no part in the slaughter but sat all through the long afternoon in his tent, still and brooding. The strange nondeath of Anaheim seemed to have had a profound effect on him. It probably did not bode well for someone. Those black moods usually ended by escalating into a towering rage and plans for bloodlettings that were bigger and more spectacular than any that had gone before.

The pseudosun went down in a searing, bloodred sunset; Reave did not know if the effect was caused by the smoke from the burning buildings or if the sun was controlled by some kind of human mood sensor. Bodies swayed on the gallows in a brisk evening breeze that had come with the sunset. By the end of the afternoon there was more than one scaffold in the small town, heavy with its strange fruit. Extended multiple rapes were being conducted in the lengthening shadows. Not only boys and young women but even some of the older

women were staked out on the ground for the leering lines of riders.

Sunset found Reave walking slowly down the main street, trying to ignore as much of what was going on as possible. He had had enough. There was no doubt in his mind that he had tofind a way out quickly. As he drew near the ziggurat and Baptiste's tent, he wondered how the Torch would react if he once again climbed the steps and took a second, longer, and more searching look at what was inside the stone structure. Such a move might well push their leader over the edge, and Reave could well imagine that he could find himself a candidate for the gallows. On the other hand, there was a streak of curiosity in his personality that would dearly love to go inside the ziggurat and see what Anaheim had been up to. While he was standing and debating with himself, he heard Baptiste's raised voice from inside the tent.

'That's it! That's what I want, and that's what will be done. Tomorrow we look for the generator and take it down.'

That was too much for Reave. He might have become inured to the death and the violence, but this was something else. The idea of taking down the stasis generator and letting the whole valley revert to nonmatter was close to blasphemy. The world had lost enough to the nothings, and if the stories about the disrupters were to be believed, more was lost every day. For a human being to wantonly revert stabilized matter had to be a betrayal of the whole physical universe. Something crystallized within Reave. Not only was he going to get away from Vlad Baptiste and his madness, somewhere along the line he was going to do his best to see that it was stopped forever. He wondered what would happen if he simply pulled out a pistol and shot Baptiste on the spot. It was a dashing, romantic idea, but he was well aware that there was still enough blind loyalty among the men for him never to walk out of there alive. He could not even make a run for it without a stasis generator of his own.

Reave had noticed before that when a resolve really crystallized the way his had, a means of making it happen often was not slow in presenting itself. And, indeed, he had to wait only a couple of hours. The pseudosun had gone down behind the mountains, and the still-smoldering ruins of the stasis town had become a scene from hell. Although he had kept out of the murder and torture, Reave had not refrained from making a fair start on getting as drunk as he could. It was one way to put a certain distance between himself, the gruesome images on every side of him, and the unrelenting throb of the victory drums. He was looking for a second bottle of the fiery malt when he spotted one of the scouts riding in, coming through the blackened and blasted stone wall where the first clash with the militia had taken place. The man had a stasis generator, and his female mount also had

one on its chest, held in place with a martingale strap. Reave knew that his chance had come. He had only to unseat the man, take his lizard and SG, and hightail it for the nothings before a pursuit could be organized. He estimated that the nothings were no more than seven or eight minutes away at a flat-out gallop, and once he was in the nothings, they would never be able to find him.

The scout was riding slowly, and Reave changed direction so that their paths would intersect. It did not require any acting skill on Reave's part to appear a fraction drunker than he really was. As the scout approached, Reave stumbled and swayed and brandished his almost empty bottle.

'Hey, buddy, y' wanna drink?'

The scout shook his head. 'I gotta report to the chief first. He'll have my head if he smells booze on my breath.'

Reave had come right up beside the lizard and its rider. At the last minute he lurched and pretended to fall against the side of the beast. The scout, already in an evil temper from having been ordered out on patrol when everyone else was whooping it up, snarled at him.

'Watch what you're doing, you shitfaced asshole!'

Reave grabbed the stirrup and pushed upward. The move was so unexpected that the man came completely out of his saddle and crashed to the ground. He lay winded for a few moments; then, gasping a string of foul obscenities, he clawed for his sidearm. Reave killed him with one shot, hoping that the flash of his pistol would not be noticed in the general mayhem. He thought he heard a shout as he swung into the saddle, but he did not look back. He had a return of the impulse to charge back through the town and kill Baptiste, but self-preservation prevailed. He put his spurs to the lizard and set it racing up the road to the pass and the nothings beyond it. He reached the pass unscathed. As he hit the stasis controls and plunged into the nothings, he realized that he did not even know the name of the town he had just helped destroy.

As with the nothings, there is still a great deal of speculation and argument regarding the true nature of Stuff Central. The distillation of all the surviving legends is that a place existed somewhere in the Damaged World that was the ultimate source of all material things. Its roots obviously lay in the matter transporters that came into regular use even before the development of the Mahler drive. The matter transporter was capable of moving

people and cargoes over short distances in space. Its essential principle was that it disassembled the basic subatomic structure of any solid object in its send chamber and broke it down into a complex microcode. This code was then transmitted to the receiving unit, which, using that code, reassembled a perfect replica of the object from available local matter. Despite the obvious moral and philosophical problems and some sensationally unpleasant early accidents, the matter transporter rapidly become part of human technology and quickly expanded its capabilities in terms of both range and the size of the objects it could handle.

By the start of the Thousand Years War the technology had been perfected whereby, instead of simply transporting matter, the microcodes could be recorded on permanent templates, and multiple facsimiles could be created at will of any object — including animals and living human beings — for which there was such a template.

The constant references to templates in all the hundreds of stories referring to Stuff Central make clear that if it existed at all, it must have employed some advanced form of this technology, and it is probable that much of the hardware, the flora and fauna, and even sections of the human population in the Damaged World were products of these templates. What is not clear is whether Stuff Central directly transmitted the required objects, or whether it only supplied a file of templates for later use. Unless the legends are totally fanciful, it would seem that we have to assume that there was some kind of center that had the capability of transmitting microcode signals with great accuracy through the chaos of nonmatter

to the scattered stasis settlements of this strange era.

Unfortunately, much of this will have to remain pure speculation. The hard archaeology for this period is so flimsy that it is unlikely that any of the theories will ever be confirmed. Not one copy of the often-mentioned Stuff Catalogue would seem to have survived the Final Cataclysm and the Reformation.

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER THREE

Novice Wellblessed sat on the rail of the half bridge,only a matter of feet from the start of the nothings. He was eating a limon and tossing the pieces of green and yellow rind into the shimmering nonmatter, watching the way they smoked and vanished as they touched it. It would take only three steps and that was it. He had no portable stasis generator, and he, too, would be one with the non and all his troubles would be over.

The Half Bridge was one of the most disturbing pieces of architecture in all of the Sanctuary. Its name described it perfectly. It was a simple wooden footbridge that arched — or, more precisely, half arched — across the stream that marked one of the boundaries of the Sanctuary. On one side of the stream there was a serene normality; on the other there was the nothings. The water simply went to the edge of the Sanctuary's stasis field and stopped. The bridge did exactly the same thing. It reached its apex and stopped. Novice Wellblessed had yet to learn the secret of why the bridge did not just topple over with no far bank to support it. As it was, it gave the impression that over in the nothings there was some sort of spectral nonbridge that perfectly complemented it and held it in place. Novice Wellblessed knew that was impossible, but he still could not shake the idea. The novices were supposed to use it as a meditative aid, an idea made solid with which they might contemplate the transitory nature of the material world. All Novice Wellblessed used it for was to sit and stare and contemplate suicide.

Of all the novices in his admission group, Wellblessed had made the slowest progress. He retained little of the instruction that he received, and his masters constantly accused him of resisting enlightenment. He had spent more hours than he could remember assuming the Attitude of Submission and accepting the Penitential Ministry. Lately he had even been cutting classes. It was really no surprise that Wellblessed was doing so badly. He had no vocation. It had been only the direst necessity that had forced him to come begging to the Sanctuary to enroll as a novice. Back in another lifetime he had gone by the name of Billy Oblivion, and he had roamed the Margins and the stasis towns, the kind of footloose rover who managed to stay one step ahead of serious trouble. Eventually, though, serious trouble had caught up with him. Aledya, his longtime traveling companion and probably the only woman he had come close to really loving, was dead from an overdose of cyclatrol, and the Rat Gang had been hard on his heels. Right behind them had been a pair of homicidal treasury agents from the city of Litz called Lenk and Lu

Yuan. Billy, in a moment of desperate stupidity, had robbed them of their graft money, and they intended to make an example of him. When, quite by accident, he had crawled on his knees into the reality of the Sanctuary with his SG all but burned out, the life of a novice had seemed the perfect answer. He would get a new name, a new identity, and three squares a day. How hard could it be? But that was before he had discovered the real meaning of soul-sick boredom. In the Sanctuary, all pleasure was canceled.

The gongs and horns had sounded from the onion domes of the minarets for the next task rotation, but Novice Wellblessed did not move. He had been thinking of himself as Billy Oblivion a lot lately. The identity of Novice Wellblessed had never sat well with him. Recently, it had not sat at all. He was supposed to be in the cubicle with his replica, learning to understand and respect himself, but he could no longer face those sessions. Soon after he had arrived at the Sanctuary, he had been templated; and when he had been deemed ready, a walking talking duplicate of himself had been created in the stuff receiver. The idea was that the time spent talking and being with his living double would eventually bring him to a degree of self-awareness that was transcendental. But in Wellblessed's case it had not happened that way. Wellblessed II had all the memories and emotions of the original. During the very first session he had wanted to know what would happen to him when Wellblessed had all the self-awareness he wanted. Wellblessed II becameincreasingly paranoid that he would be killed once he was no longer needed.

'I mean, I don't care how I got here. I'm here, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm alive. They can't just kill me. I'm not a thing, I'm a person.'

Wellblessed had compassion for his double, but there was one overwhelming problem. 'I know you're a person. The trouble is that the person you are happens to be me. The seat's already taken.'

They had talked about working out some sort of escape plan, but Wellblessed had very quickly realized that he had no intention of going through with anything of the sort. He really did not want a second Novice Wellblessed running around loose. Aside from the broad karmic considerations, there was also the very practical point that each of them was liable to get into all manner of trouble, and there was no guarantee that the right twin would take the rap for his own actions. Since their thought processes were absolutely alike, Wellblessed II realized exactly the same thing at almost exactly the same time. He became so glum that it was impossible to spend any time with him. From the way he looked at his original during those increasingly difficult sessions, he clearly was working on the theory that Wellblessed might be plotting to kill him. The idea had indeed

passed through the novice's mind, but he had not actually taken it any further than toying with it as a possible way out of the dilemma. The process certainly was not what the Masters had in mind.

Novice Wellblessed continued to stare into the nothings until a voice from behind made him turn.

'I see once again that you have failed to attend the empathy session with your duplicate.'

It was Richthofen, the Master of Discipline. Wellblessed sighed. If Richthofen had come looking for him, he knew that he was deep in the shit again. He turned and faced Master Richthofen. 'That's right.'

'You have an explanation, perhaps?'

'I don't believe that the sessions are going anywhere.'

Master Richthofen stood ramrod-straight, a trim figure in his saffron bodysuit. There was a positive gloss to his closely shaved head, but his expression was sour and censorious. 'That's hardly something that a novice is qualified to decide for himself.'

'The duplicate's a psycho. He believes that we're all plotting to kill him.'

'If he's a psycho, then you must be a psycho, too. You are, after all, identical.'

Novice eyed master coldly. 'That's quite possible.'

'The duplicate empathy sessions are designed to give you a unique chance to work through this kind of self-directed hostility.'

Wellblessed was starting to lose patience with all the nonsense. The Billy Oblivion side of his personality could remember times when his hostility had been the only thing that had saved his ass in a tight corner. 'I'm telling you, it's not happening.'

Richthofen's eyes narrowed. 'Perhaps we have to make it happen.'

Wellblessed could feel cowboy hostility coming to the rescue. He was a grown man, damn it. He had wandered all over the Damaged World. He was sick of being treated like a recalcitrant schoolboy. He turned and faced the Master head-on.

'Listen, you can do what you like to me. You can have me crawling across a floor of cut-glass beads or whatever queer punishment you can think up, but sooner or later you're going to have to accept the fact that I'm just not novice material. I don't have a vocation. Dig?'

'Then perhaps you should leave us.'

Wellblessed had not expected that response. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'You're throwing me out?'

Master Richthofen shook his head. 'We don't throw people out.'

'But if I go, you won't stop me. Right?'

'Exactly.'

'Can I get my things?'

'Your things are gone. They were destroyed when you announced your intention to renounce the material world.'

That was bad news. The duster coat that he had been wearing when he had arrived had been cool.

'What about my guns? Are they still around? It can get savage out there.'

'There are no weapons in the Sanctuary.'

'So suppose I just use the Stuff Catalogue to get — '

Richthofen was already shaking his head. Wellblessed looked down at the shapeless novice's shift that was his only garment. Hell, they didn't even give out drawers in this place.

'I can't go out into the world looking like some cheesehead monk.'

'Then return to your empathy class.'

Wellblessed leaned back against the rail and slowly nodded. Okay, Richthofen, he thought. He knew when he was getting the shaft. 'So I go out looking like this? Don't I even get an SG?'

'You'll be given a stasis generator.'

'Don't do me any favors.'

Master Richthofen was clearly through with him. 'Try to be off the Sanctuary by nightfall.'

Nightfall came quickly, and with it a torrential downpour. By the time he had drawn a stasis generator, charged up, and scrounged a little food from the kitchens, the rain was coming down in straight gray sheets. Wellblessed had a sneaking suspicion that the weather conditions had been arranged for his benefit. Soaked and desolate, he trudged through the dripping ornamental garden. He was making for the Half Bridge. It seemed an appropriate way to go out. He was in the Place of Meaningful Boulders and getting close to the bridge when, for the second time that day, his thoughts were interrupted by a voice from behind.

'Billy Oblivion, wait up!'

It was strange to hear his own name spoken aloud after so long. The imprinted personality of Novice Wellblessed dropped away as though it had never been. For better or worse, he was Billy Oblivion again. Unfortunately, the return of his old personality came with a brand-new problem. The voice was hideously familiar. Billy turned and saw that his duplicate was coming after him.

'What do you want?' Billy demanded.

'I want to come with you.'

Billy halted. 'Don't be ridiculous. Two identical people can't go traveling together. There are places were they'd stone us to death as an abomination in the eyes of Zanthar.'

Oblivion II looked desperate. 'If I stay here, they'll run off another

replica and put me in your place.'

Billy wiped the rain from his shaved head. 'I feel for you, but it ain't my problem anymore.'

The duplicate had a dangerous look in his eye. Billy had never thought he was capable of looking so mean. The two of them realized at the same moment that only one of them was going to walk away from that place. It might have been that Oblivion II was a fraction slower. Later Billy would come to believe that it was because the other was the copy. An original had to be just that bit better. In any case, Billy had the edge. He was the one standing next to a harmonic arrangement of fist-size chunks of uncut quartz. He grabbed one and swung. The replica tried to block the blow with his arm. Billy heard the snap of bone. He swung again and again, overcoming the problem of fighting someone who thought exactly as he did by resorting to mindless rage. He wanted to kill; he wanted to completely obliterate the interloper. He was not killing himself. He was killing a thing. He was killing a created thing. Nobody could blame him for that. It was him or it. If he did not kill it, it would usurp his life and his personality. He went on smashing at it. Die, you bastard!

The replica was down, but Billy kept beating it. He knelt beside it, hammering its face with the rock until it was a bloody pulp. Blood was every where. Blood was making the rock slippery and hard to grip. Blood stained his shift. There was blood all over the wet gravel. The rain running down his forearms was bloodred.

Finally he stopped. He was sobbing, totally spent. The body was unrecognizable. It was not him anymore. He found that he could not get up off his knees. He flopped onto his back, and the rain beat down on his face. The water tasted good as it ran into his mouth. He had killed himself and lived through it. After long minutes he found the strength to roll over and push himself up onto all fours. He started coughing and retching. The food that he had brought from the kitchen for the journey was scattered and trampled into the gravel. He forced himself to his feet and stumbled to the bank of the stream. In a daze, he stripped off his garment and tried to wash off the worst of the blood. As he wrung it out, he stared at the nothings on the other side of the water. What did they have in store for him? Shivering with cold and shock, he pulled on the wet shift and started toward the bridge.

At the top of the Half Bridge he stopped and briefly looked back at the rain-drenched Sanctuary. The three huge pods, like monster tulips on squat, thick stalks, and the taller spires of the minarets were all but obscured by a thick mist. Momentarily he had an impulse to run, to beg them to take him back. He knew that was impossible. He turned on his stasis generator and stepped into the nonmatter.

No matter how many times he crossed the nothings, nothing

could stop the fear of that first step. It was more than just the flash that the SG might turn out to be malfunctioning. It was the truly primal terror of entering an environment that was so utterly alien that it was almost beyond comprehension. There was also a very practical reason to be afraid. Billy had no way to navigate. No lizardbrain for him: Aledya and the Minstrel Boy had had the transplants. Nobody had ever tampered with him. He was going in blind, hoping that he would stumble across a stable area before he died of hunger or thirst or his SG ran out of power.

The portable stasis generator, even running at full power, could not maintain stable reality much beyond the area immediately around its user. Billy had about ten inches of clear air in front of his face, and a patch of solid ground formed each time he put a foot down. He could breathe and he could move, and the temperature of his strictly limited reality remained constant, neither warm nor cold. There was nothing to do but continue to trudge on. There was no sound but his own breathing and absolutely nothing to look at but the bright swirling fog. Billy knew that one of the first dangers in the nothings was a crushing hypnotic boredom. The only things that punctuated it were the moments when his subjective gravity shifted through ninety degrees and pitched him onto his side us though he had been hit by a sudden pile-driving wind. It was painful and annoying, but at least it was something. There was also a strange, cold comfort in the way the SG was always able to produce enough solid ground for him to fall on.

In the nothings time quickly ceased to exist. Billy had no idea how long he had been walking. It could have been no more than a few minutes, or it could have been a day. He knew that he was hungry and that his mouth was very dry, but the nothings seemed to provide a certain kind of numbness. When everything around him was so dangerously strange, his own minor discomfortshardly seemed to signify. He simply plodded on. Walking became the core of his being. He helped maximize the numbness by making himself as mindless as he could. He behaved like a prisoner on a treadmill: one foot after the other; don't even think about it. If he thought about anything, it would open the door to the fear that he knew was waiting for him below the surface. Perhaps he was not going anywhere at all. Maybe he was just walking around in circles, if such a thing as a circle existed in the nothings. There were stories about people in his situation, people who had crossed the nothings without a lizard or a lizardbrain to guide them and had never come to stasis again. In the end they just gave up and turned off their SGs. Of course, those stories had to be pure speculation. How could anyone be there to know for sure? Even so, the stories were far from comforting.

In a place where the senses were so completely deprived, a small

tactile change in the ground under Billy's feet was a major event. It felt like a small pebble under his big toe. He looked down, scarcely daring to hope. It *was* a pebble. The ground under his feet had taken on an uneven texture. There was dirt and small rocks, not just the flat colorless; basic matter that had been there previously. Had he really reached somewhere solid? He took two more paces — and he was out. The nothings were behind him.

The nature of the place he had reached was something else. The nothings were still all around him, but they were at a distance. He seemed to be in a tunnel of stability that had been driven straight through the nonmatter. The purpose of the tunnel seemed to be to enclose a wide, smooth six-lane highway that ran to distant perspective points in either direction. The rocks and gravel under his feet were the hard shoulder of the highway.

The road through the nonmatter was like nothing Billy had ever seen before. A muted light came from glowing spheres, almost like miniature, featureless moons that hung close to the curved roof formed by the edge of the nothings overhead. Billy's initial reaction was that the road was empty, but he quickly realized that he was wrong. A procession of faint, ghostly shapes moved along it. They were formless and indistinct. He could not make out any real details of their shape, but they were definitely there. It was as if they were something that was leaking through from another dimension, or maybe weird visual echoes of travelers who had gone before. Billy shivered. The shapes gave him the creeps; also, it was much colder in the tunnel than it had been in the nothings. The numbness was going, and his thirst and hunger were much more intrusive. He might have arrived somewhere, but it was an exceedingly minimal somewhere, and it looked as though he still had a long way to go before even his most basic needs could be satisfied. He supposed he should have been grateful, but it was hard as he stood beside the highway, wondering which way to go and without even a coin to flip.

After some pointless pondering, he made an arbitrary choice, turned to the right, and started walking. As far as he could estimate, he had been walking for maybe an hour and was deeply unhappy about it when he heard the noise behind him. It was the hum of a very real engine. He spun around. Was it really a vehicle? A solid, human vehicle? All he saw was a moving dot way off in the distance.

The dot was getting noticeably bigger, and the hum was growing louder. Whatever it was, it seemed to be moving at quite a speed, and in a short space of time he was able to make out some details. It was definitely a ground car, either red or orange, squatly streamlined and with some sort of greenhouse canopy in the front. Even though he did not have a clue as to what he might expect from whoever might be

riding in the car, Billy stepped out into the road and started waving his arm. The car sped along the highway surface on a slickfield that was probably only millimeters thick. The thing was larger than he had first assumed — from base to roof, it was eight or nine feet high. Although built for minimum wind resistance, it was chunky and bulbous, like an egg lying on one flattened side. Gaudy, stylized flames were painted on its bodywork, and there was indeed a greenhouse canopy at the front for the driver and/or passenger. The whole thing ended in a set of stubby fins.

At first it looked as though the car was not going to stop. In fact, for a few moments Billy had the impression that it was deliberately going to run him down. Then there was the hiss of retrojets, and the garish machine slewed to a halt right beside him. A section of canopy opened, and a face peered out.

'You look a mess.'

A story came effortlessly to Billy. 'I was attacked and robbed. I've been wandering around in the nothings.'

'Where are you headed?'

'That's hard to say. I don't even know where I am.'

'You want a ride?'

'I'd be real grateful.'

The face, which had narrow blue eyes, sandy hair, and a spiky beard, grinned. The grin was not particularly pleasant. 'How could you be grateful if you was robbed? Strikes me you wouldn't have too much to be grateful with.'

Billy did his best to look honest, harmless, and pathetic at the same time. He had no trouble with the last part. 'If you could give me a ride to civilization, I'd owe you a big one.'

'In my experience, being owed a big one and getting a big one are two very different things.'

Billy made a helpless gesture. 'What can I tell you? I'm stranded.'

The face appeared to be thinking; then it made up its mind. 'Ah, what the hell. I can always toss you out again if you bug me.' A hatch to the rear of the canopy popped open. 'Climb aboard.'

Entering the vehicle was like crawling into a mobile womb. The walls were covered with quilted pink, tuck-and-roll leather. The floor was as soft as a mattress and was covered in a thick pile of shaggy pink fur. A hologram projection panel on the ceiling filled the rear of the vehicle with undulating abstract erotics. Billy was scarcely inside when the hatch sighed closed, the driver banged it into drive, and the machine accelerated away. Billy lost his balance and sprawled into the fur.

The driver glanced back. 'Come and sit up here.'

The driver occupied a contoured command chair in the nose of

the ground craft. With a fast gesture he indicated the smaller contour berth beside him. Billy crawled forward and eased himself into the berth.

'Nice machine.'

'It'll do.'

The driver was short and thickset, with pale, almost transparent skin. He was dressed in a mylar jumpsuit with red and blue slogans on it written in a chunky script Billy could neither read nor recognize. He turned his head and grinned at Billy. He had a mouthful of bad crooked teeth.

'You know something? I almost ran you down.'

'I'm glad you didn't.'

'Thought you were a stinking priest. Can't stand priests. Always try to run them down if I find them in the road.'

'I'm no priest.'

'You look like one in that there dress.'

'It's all the robbers left me.'

'They left you your SG.'

Billy nodded.

The driver glanced at him suspiciously. 'Most of the boys I know would have taken the SG double fast. A guy who's one with the non can't come after you.'

'Maybe they had pity on me.'

The driver shook his head. 'Thieves with pity? What's the world coming to?'

He suddenly stuck out a hand. 'The name's Schook Jetstream.'

Billy briefly clasped the hand. 'Please to meet you. I'm Billy.'

Jetstream took another look at Billy. The suspicion was back. 'I knew a Billy once.'

'There are a lot of Billys in this world.'

Schook Jetstream nodded thoughtfuxxly. 'I guess there are.'

For the moment, at least, his worries seemed to be allayed. He fumbled in one of the many patch pockets of his reflective jumpsuit. 'You want a rubyjewel?'

He was holding out one of the clear, red, very powerful stimulant beads. If he lived on those things, Billy thought, it would account for the transparency of his skin.

'Sure, I don't mind if I do.' The rubyjewel would certainly stop the pangs of hunger.

Schook Jetstream seemed pleased by the response. 'Least you can't be no priest. No priest would take one of those.'

Billy put the bead in his mouth, but his throat was too dry to swallow. 'Do you have any water?'

Jetstream shook his head. 'I got a beer, though.'

He took one hand off the controls, reached down into a cooler beside the command chair, and produced a can. It was silver, with more of the indecipherable characters. Billy took it and popped the seal. It tasted wonderful. He could not remember how long it had been since he had tasted beer. He sank back in his chair as the bead began to work and stared out the greenhouse canopy. The highway looked no different from the way ithad been when he had climbed into Jetstream's machine, but judging from the way the globes of light were flashing past overhead, the ground craft was traveling at high speed. The phrase 'speeding to nowhere' flashed through Billy's mind.

Schook Jetstream opened a beer of his own. He took a long pull and once again showed Billy his crooked teeth. 'So you don't know where you are, right?'

He seemed to take quite a delight in Billy's supposed misfortune. Billy was not at all sure what to make of Jetstream. If the man had a rubyjewel habit, he could expect sudden, unpredictable shifts of mood.

'That's right, I'm totally lost.'

'And you don't know where you want to go?'

'I'll go anywhere, any place where I can get myself fixed up.'

'I'm probably going on through to Graveyard.'

'That would do me just fine.'

'So maybe I'll let you ride along with me.'

Billy nodded his thanks. He did not particularly like the way Jetstream had used the word 'maybe.' He turned back to the view. They were running straight through a cluster of the indistinct ghostly shapes. He looked at Jetstream. 'What are those things?'

Jetstream's face was blank. 'What things?'

Billy pointed through the canopy. 'Those things.'

Jetstream's head turned. His eyes were cold, the suspicion back in spades. 'You weirding on me? You been in the nothings too long?'

Billy realized that Schook Jetstream could not see the ghostly shapes. He lamely shook his head. 'It's nothing. Just my imagination.'

'You better not be weirding on me. I'll throw you out right now.'

Billy did his best to reassure the driver. 'Really, it's okay. I just thought I saw something. You know how it can get.'

'Do I? Do I? I'm not sure that I do.'

Things were starting to get difficult. 'Why don't we just forget it.'

'I'm not sure about you, Billy. I bring you in here and I give you a rubyjewel and a beer to wash it clown, and now you start weirding on me.'

If anyone was weirding, it was Schook Jetstream.

'I'm not weirding, I'm okay.'

Jetstream was thinking again. 'Billy. . Billy? I could swear.'

To Billy's alarm, Jetstream suddenly slammed a fist into the control panel.

'I knew I knew you! Billy! Just Billy, huh? I know who you are, friend. You're Billy Oblivion!'

Billy's heart froze. 'I. .'

He could swear that he had never met the man. Unless, of course, the nothings had time-warped him.

Schook Jetstream hit the retros, and the vehicle shuddered to a stop. Billy, who had not bothered to strap in, was thrown headfirst into the canopy. Jetstream was glaring at him with a look of pure hate.

'Out!'

Billy was dizzy and a little stunned. He had trouble getting his arms and legs untangled. Jetstream was throwing off his safety webbing. Billy was on his hands and knees, crawling back down the cabin. Jetstream aimed a kick at him.

'Out, I said! Out of here, you murderous bastard!'

Jetstream was smashing at Billy with boots and fists. As Billy tried to avoid the blows, he wondered desperately what he might have done to the man. He could not remember ever having set eyes on him before. He was well aware that there were plenty of people who might be more than justified in reacting to him like that. He just couldn't place Jetstream among their number. The other man had turned back to the control console. The hatch popped. Then Jetstream was coming at him again, brandishing a short black billy club.

'Out of here! Get out!'

Without thinking, Billy rolled through the hatch. He fell heavily to the road surface, grazing his knees and elbows. Above him, Jetstream was screaming.

'I hope you die out there! I hope you rot! Why don't you crawl into the nothings and be done with it, you bastard!'

The backwash rolled Billy over like a piece of discarded garbage as the red and yellow machine gunned away. He lay facedown on the cold, hard surface. So far, things were not going too well.

> *In the early days, there were attempts to halt the spread of the nothings. In the notorious Duncannon experiment, a tiny particle of antimatter was fired through the outer edge of a stasis field and into the nonmatter of the nothings. The resulting explosion was so disastrous that the experiment was never repeated.*

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER FOUR

Renatte de Luxe and the Minstrel Boy had been making love, so they had ignored the warning tone from the submarine's biode. Sex between the passenger chairs was an amazingly athletic challenge. When the tone had come informing him that the lizardbrain had locked to a menu of possible destinations, they were so entwined that the Minstrel Boy probably would not have been able to reach the control to make the selection command if he had wanted to. Now a display glowed in the air.

LOCK LOST.

The Minstrel Boy untangled himself from Renatta. 'Damn!' Renatta's breath was still coming in short, labored gasps. 'So much for the afterglow.'

LIZARDBRAIN SWEEPING FOR RANDOM PROXIMITY.

'What does that mean?'

'It means that we can't pick our spot. The lizardbrain is casting around for the nearest stable area that has a water approach. Whatever 'nearest' means in the nothings.'

'Does it really matter where we go?'

'There are places where I'd rather not go.'

'But we missed being able to choose?'

'The one good thing about coming in by water is that you usually have a chance to take a look and back out if you don't like it.'

STABLE POINT LOCATED.

'All we can do is keep our fingers crossed.'

They came out of the nothings at periscope depth in dark water. The Minstrel Boy raised the scope and made a slow 360-degree sweep.

'We seem to be at the mouth of a very large river.'

'Do you recognize it?'

The Minstrel Boy leaned on the handgrips in the traditional submarine commander pose, although the traditional submarine commander was not normally bareass naked.

'I don't know. I've seen a couple of places where there are sections of wide river.' He stopped the sweep and turned the periscope back again. 'Will you look at that!'

'What?'

'There seems to be a war going on.'

Renatta, also naked, moved up beside him. 'We've come out in the middle of a war?'

The Minstrel Boy slapped the handgrips into the upright position and retracted the periscope. 'I'm going to surface and take a better look.'

'Isn't that dangerous?'

The Minstrel Boy was pulling on his pants. 'We're quite some distance out.'

He swung into the pilot chair and manually brought the vessel to the surface. He set the controls to maintain their current position, then ducked back toward the hatch. Dressed only in his old leather pants, he opened the hatch and began to climb out. Renatta made no move to follow him.

'Be careful.'

As the periscope had shown, they were well out from the mouth of a wide river. It was night, but a pair of phony moons made it almost as bright as day. To one side of the river there was dark green jungle; to the other, a stately mansion with a classic columned portico dominated a low headland. The mansion was burning like a torch, flames streaming from the windows and being reflected in the black mirror of the water. As the Minstrel Boy watched, the roof collapsed in a galaxy of sparks. Farther upriver a red dirigible with skull insignias on its side was dropping incendiaries on a second target while small monoplanes made strafing runs. From the way the airship hung motionless in the air, it was clearly meeting no resistance from the ground. The audible chatter of gunfire must have been coming exclusively from the planes.

The Minstrel Boy leaned into the body of the submarine. 'You should come up here and take a look at this.'

'Is it safe?'

'We're a good way out. I don't think anyone's going to notice us.'

Renatta, dressed once again in her lace shift, emerged from the hatch. She let out a low whistle. 'Pretty spectacular. Why are those planes doing that?'

The Minstrel Boy put an arm around her shoulder. The air was not particularly warm out on the water.

'Anybody's guess. They're probably air pirates. Those guys will hit a target just for the fun of it.'

'People have strange ideas of fun.'

'That's the first thing you learn.'

'We can't land here, can we?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'It doesn't look as though it would be a very good idea.'

'So what do we do?'

'Quietly go back the way we came.'

As he spoke, one of the monoplanes broke off the attack and made a high turn toward the open sea. It began trailing flares from its wing tips in an obvious signal.

The Minstrel Boy cursed. 'I think that plane's telling the others

that it's spotted an unarmed submarine coming in from the sea. We're not going to leave here quietly. Quickly, get below.'

Renatta de Luxe needed no second urging. The Minstrel Boy was pleased that she did not waste time asking redundant questions. He swung down through the hatch right behind her. As he quickly dogged the cover, he gave verbal commands to the biode.

'Take control. Crash dive. We are under air attack. Run for the nothings in a high-speed evasive pattern. I waive stasis protocol and relinquish all participation.'

In such a situation, the biode was much smarter and a hundred times as fast as he was. It was only human vanity that made men involve themselves in the world of machines. As he ducked into the pilot seat, he gestured to Renatta.

'Strap in! The g-comp will only make a dent in what's about to happen. It's going to be a roller coaster until we hit the nothings.'

A Klaxon blared, and warnings hung in the air.

CRASH DIVE!

CRASH DIVE!

The gold submarine made a bucking plunge and started to run for the nothings like a minnow trying to outmaneuver a hungry shark. There were explosions of bubbles on either sideof them. The monoplane was dropping mines of some kind. The Minstrel Boy clutched the inoperative control levers with his shoulders hunched protectively around his ears and his eyes tightly shut. If he was going to be blown to pieces, he saw no reason to watch it coming. The boat rolled and twisted. The whole framework was vibrating, and the noise of the drive was a deafening anguish. The biode had taken him at his word and was pushing firmly at the envelope. When it abruptly stopped, he almost believed that he had died. With absolutely no feeling of deceleration, all noise and motion ceased. There was nothing but the ticking of the clock, their own still-labored breathing, and the small internal sounds of the submarine.

'The nothings,' the Minstrel Boy announced.

'That was something.'

The Minstrel Boy unstrapped. 'You liked that?'

'One way to work up an appetite.'

The Minstrel Boy blinked. 'You're hungry?'

'Threats to my life take me that way.'

'I think we should find a destination before we do anything else. I don't like to *be* in the nothings for any longer than need be.'

'It'll be better than the last one?'

'I'll merge with the biode and watch while the lizardbrain takes a look around.'

He grasped the control levers and settled into the intelligence

cushion. Almost immediately there was an image. A building stood on its own isolated, mist-shrouded hill. It was a strange, uneven asymmetrical structure that looked as if it had been built in relays without a coherent plan. There were buttresses and turrets and sloping batwing roofs. Spires rose from the granite complexity like seedlings desperately reaching for a light that had failed. The place might just as well have grown there. It had that older-than-the-rocks-on-which-it-sat permanence. The most applicable word was "pile." The overall effect was brooding Gothic, but style was joined to style with total abandon. Although there was something very forbidding about its towering bulk, the bright lights shining from its irregular doors, windows, and terraces were warm and welcoming.

'The Voice in the Wilderness.'

'What?' Renatta asked.

'I suppose you could call it an inn. A lot of travelers passthrough there, and you can get pretty much anything you might want. It's the domain of an individual called Ramilles Diamenti, who's as old as God.'

'What's he like, this Ramilles Diamenti?'

'He's about as big as God, too. A huge man, and he rules his kingdom with a rod of iron. You can get rowdy at the Voice in the Wilderness, but if you step over the line and cause real trouble, Ramilles Diamenti will break you in half.'

'You've been there.'

'Sure, I've been through there a dozen times.'

'You think it's the place for us?'

'If it's still the way it used to be, it'd be a good start. There is one small snag, though.'

'There is?'

'It works on a money system, and you don't have any.'

'Why should anybody bother with money when everything comes from Stuff Central?'

'Some places just like to do it that way. Nostalgia, maybe. It's also a matter of control. Diamenti's nothing if not a control freak.'

Renatta looked at the Minstrel Boy with calculating eyes. She clearly had her own sense of nostalgia where money was concerned. 'Do you have any money?'

'I've got some gold coins that I can use in an emergency. I was also planning on selling the submarine.'

Renatta treated him to a dazzling smile. 'Maybe you could help me get started. I mean, if you're selling the submarine, we did both come from the Caverns in it.'

The Minstrel Boy hesitated, then shrugged. 'Maybe.'

Renatta waved a hand, dismissing the subject. 'Money's no

problem.'

The gold submarine surfaced in a small lagoon in the outer roots of the structure. It was almost like suddenly coming up into a large swimming pool, except that the quays enclosing it were constructed from huge blocks of rough-hewn stone. It was only up close that the newcomers were treated to the full impact of just how big the Voice in the Wilderness really was. From the bottom, it was more like a fortress than an inn. It had been constructed on a truly monumental scale. There was a mist on the water and a strange metallic smell in the air. Three other craft were tied up at the steel jetty that extended from the quay almost to the center of the lagoon. Two were small submarines similar to the one from the Caverns. The third was a power bathyscaphe of a type the Minstrel Boy had never seen before.

As they walked down the jetty, Renatta hugged her arms around her breasts. 'It's cold here.'

'They don't dress as scanty at the Voice in the Wilderness as they do in the Caverns.'

'I have to get some clothes.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned and hitched the strap of his veetar case to a more comfortable position on his shoulder. 'That shouldn't be a problem.'

At the end of the jetty a flight of stone steps lit by green-yellow gas flames led up to a broad terrace that overlooked the lagoon. The Minstrel Boy pointed. 'If we go up there and along, we'll come to the entrance to the Great Hall. That's the first place to hit. It's where everything goes on.'

Renatta raised an eyebrow. 'Everything?'

'If it don't go on, it at least gets started there.'

There were a number of ground vehicles parked along one side of the terrace. It was an exotic and impressive selection. A Concorde-Napier six-wheeler with hand-assembled coachwork and polished brass trim stood beside a Fragg Crusher with multiple treads and animal pelts hanging from its mast and roll bars. A K7 Road Rocket with extended fins and a black kahee symbol painted on the side was parked by itself. A Zinn walker knelt on immobilized legs. The prize for sheer formidable size went to a fully armored Saab battlewagon with full gun ports and a heat ray. The Minstrel Boy stopped and stared at it.

'There's going to be some hard cases in the old saloon tonight.'

Beyond the ground cars the unmistakable warm, rank smell of marma lizards came from a wide, arched entrance that had to be the mouth of a tunnel to the underground stables.

Renatta glanced back toward the lagoon. 'I'm not sure I like this place.'

The Minstrel Boy put an arm around her shoulders. 'You'll get to like it fine. It could have been made for you.'

She brightened considerably as she got her first sight of the entrance to the Great Hall. They had passed from the terrace, through a short tunnel, and into a wide courtyard where a twice-life-size and extremely lewd hologram cooze dancer undulated on a pedestal.

'That's an actual print of the legendary Desdemona Princess,' the Minstrel Boy explained.

'No kidding.'

'Diamenti's a great collector.'

Music and noise, along with the smells of food, drink, and humanity, wafted from a wide doorway at the far end of the courtyard. There was a loud burst of the electric, nasal music of the ancients.

Memories that linger in my heart,
Memories that make my heart grow cold,
Until the day we love again, sweetheart,
And my blue moon again will turn to gold.

The Great Hall of the Voice in the Wilderness was part bazaar, part saloon, and part marketplace; it was a dance hall and a gambling joint and a public promenade. A dozen different entertainments were going on under its high, hammer-beam roof. The crowds swirled, the pitchmen hollered, and the musicians leaned into their instruments, trying to compete with the noise. Jugglers played with fire and knives, Indian clubs, and bowling balls; dancers twisted and sweated while myriad lights were reflected from oiled bodies. Dice rolled, slick hands dealt the cards, and the wheel of fortune spun. Hands, eyes, mouths, and gestures made offers and suggested exchanges that were as old as time. It all went on under the hard, watchful eyes of Diamenti's keepers, big men with guns on their hips and stun wands hanging from their wrists.

Renatta seemed to have completely reversed her opinion of the place. She looked around delightedly and, in her near nudity, was looked at plenty in return. 'It's like the whole world was here.'

'Maybe more than that.'

Renatta glanced curiously at the Minstrel Boy. 'What do you mean?'

'Aliens.'

'Aliens?'

'There are stories that on the upper floors and in the towersthere are aliens, trapped in this Damaged World by the unset of the nothings.'

Renatta grimaced. 'I find that kind of creepy.'

The Minstrel Boy sighed. 'I find that kind of sad, the idea of these strange beings stuck here, never able to go home. Of course, it's only a story and Diamenti always denies it, but it is a fact that nobody's ever allowed on the upper floors.'

They had been in the Great Hall only a matter of minutes when the Minstrel Boy was asked if he would sell his veetar. The offer came from a small balding man in a silk suit. He had the smooth assurance of someone who thought he knew the price of everything.

The Minstrel Boy looked at him in complete disbelief. 'I'd rather sell my mother.'

After the man in the silk suit moved on, Renatta grinned at the Minstrel Boy.' Somehow I can't picture you with a mother.'

'Everyone has a mother.'

'Why didn't you sell the thing? You never play it.'

'Things change.'

'Does that mean that you're going to start playing again?'

'It means that things change.'

A swarthy individual in a black toga trimmed with gold, who looked like a slaver from the Margins, buttonholed the Minstrel Boy and wanted to know if he would sell him Renatta.

The Minstrel Boy smiled. 'She isn't mine to sell. She's not my property.'

'Damn right I'm not his property.'

The slaver spread his hands. 'A thousand pardons, beautiful lady, but you looked so. .' His eyes ran up and down her body, and he licked his lips.

Renatta regarded him with amusement. 'I looked so what? Available? Good enough to eat?'

The slaver bowed low. 'I meant no offense. Indeed, if you would consider allowing me to have a template made of you so I could create a replica, I would pay very well.'

Renatta de Luxe put her hand on a tilted hip, flaunting herself at the slaver. 'I don't see how that could do any harm. How much would you give me?'

The Minstrel Boy scowled and quickly shook his head. 'No. Don't do it.' His voice was hard, almost angry.

Renatta looked at him in surprise. 'Why the hell not?'

'Think about it. Once he's got your template, he can make as many copies of you as he likes. They'd be just like you, with your memories and your feelings. They'd know what you know and think like you think. He could sell them; he could do anything he liked with them. You want that to happen to people just like you?'

Renatta slowly shook her head. 'No, I guess not.'

The slaver scowled and moved off.

Renatta looked sourly at the Minstrel Boy. 'You're getting real ethical about how I establish my financial base.'

'I just believe that you should never let yourself be templated. Once a template exists, anything can happen to it. It can go anywhere. I hate the whole idea.'

He looked around before moving on.

'I guess we ought to try and get ourselves organized.'

He said it as much for his own benefit as for Renatta's. He was a little overwhelmed by the constant bustle of the Great Hall. After spending so long soul-dreaming in the Caverns, it took a little effort to adjust to a place that was so full of energy and transactional action. The babble was all around him, and he had to relearn quickly the trick of putting a certain distance between himself and the noise. Concentrating on the task at hand helped.

'We need a room before we do anything else. I think I'll change one of my coins into the local scrip so we have a bit of money to play with.'

He stopped at a change booth, secretively slid one of the antique coins from the concealed pocket on his belt, and exchanged it for a stack of duty paper bills. Diamenti was ultratraditionalist regarding his monetary system. After that the Minstrel Boy filed a deal option on the submarine with one of Diamenti's buying agents and picked up a larger stack of currency that represented a twenty percent deposit. The deal would be finalized and the Minstrel Boy would be able to collect the balance of his cash after the report from the official valuer, an independent functionary whose word was absolute in all major sales to the house.

Renatta watched with interest as the Minstrel Boy stuffed the bills into one of his pockets. 'So do we get a room now?'

The Minstrel Boy looked around. 'I think I could use a drink before we go any farther.'

'Suits me.'

They started toward the nearest bar. Before they reached it, however, the Minstrel Boy suddenly stopped in his tracks. 'Uh oh.'

'What?'

'I think I just saw a guy I know.'

'Which one?'

'He's by the bar, and he's got his back to us. He's the tall guy, the one in the short gray hussar's jacket and the plumed hat.'

'I see him. is this going to be a problem?'

The Minstrel Boy pushed his hands through his hair. 'I really don't know. The last time I ran into him, it turned into a seven-day drunk, and I can't exactly remember the terms on which we parted company.'

'So what do you want to do?'

'I'm not too sure.'

At that moment it ceased to matter what the Minstrel Boy wanted to do. The man in the plumed hat turned, spotted him — and glared. For the first time Renatta saw the exotic matching pistols that were stuck through his belt. An old scar ran down the left side of his hard tanned face. It was not a face too strong on either patience or tolerance.

'I see you, Minstrel Boy,' the man said.

'I see you too, Reave Mekonta.'

Renatta took a step back. The two men stood staring at each other, faces impassive. The Minstrel Boy's right hand was hanging loosely at his side. Renatta knew that he had his big silver pistol, which he had gone to much trouble to conceal, stuck down the back of his leather pants. Others were also moving out of the path between the two men. She did not want to think about what was going to happen next.

The Minstrel Boy also did not want to think about what was going to happen next. Ramilles Diamenti, as an unswerving market libertarian, did not think it was any of the management's business to relieve patrons of their weapons. He did, however, reserve the right to maintain certain standards of order. Accordingly, in addition to the armed keepers on the floor, there were sharpshooters positioned up in the rafters, ready to drop anyone who pulled a piece. The Minstrel Boy was aware that the shooter's eyes, if not their gun sights, were certainly riveted on his back by now.

Reave took a step forward. His face was impossible to read. The Minstrel Boy did the same. Sweat was running from his armpits. A crowd of spectators were watching them from a safe distance. The keepers were starting to close in, Reave took another step. The Minstrel Boy knew that he could not stand toe to toe with a man of Reave's height and weight and slug it out. He wished he still had his knives — he did not want to have to use the gun. He decided that the best thing to do was to let Reave make the first move. Then he would dive for the floor and try to come up shooting.

Reave took another step, closing the gap between them. The Minstrel Boy tensed. Suddenly Reave Mekonta's face cracked, and he let out a loud guffaw. The Minstrel Boy also started laughing, letting the tension flood out of him. Renatta shook her head as the two men fell into each other's arms. After a lot of hugging and backslapping they finally separated, holding each other at arm's length.

'How in the hell have you been doing, Minstrel Boy?'

'I've been doing okay. How about you? You're looking good, pal o' mine.'

'Well, I had a little trouble recently, but what else is new? I seem to be doing all right as of now.'

Arms around each other's shoulders, they headed for the bar. The crowd opened up to let them through. The spectators went back to whatever they had been doing. Some seemed relieved, but others were definitely disappointed at being deprived of a free show. With drinks in their hands, the two old friends started catching up on what each had been up to.

'So after that you started running with Vlad Baptiste?'

'I guess so. I was kind of shell-shocked around that time, shell-shocked and shocking, if you know what I mean.'

'Baptiste's a homicidal schizo.'

'That's why I deserted.'

Renatta positioned herself between the two of them. 'Is this a private romance or can anyone join in?'

Reave looked her up and down and then grinned at the Minstrel Boy. 'She with you? She don't wear much, does she?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned back. 'She rode down here from the Caverns with me. And you're right, she doesn't wear much.'

Renatta scowled at the two of them. 'I'd wear more if someone would help me get some clothes.'

The Minstrel Boy smiled genially. 'We will, we will, but join us for a drink first. Let's have a couple of drinks.'

Drinks were ordered. The Voice in the Wilderness had everything they could have wanted. Reave and the Minstrel Boy ordered two more malts, while Renatta opted for a dry martini. The men returned to their discussion.

'So you were laying up in the Caverns all this time.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'Living was pretty easy until the hunting season started.'

Drink followed drink, and the stories became taller and taller. After a while Renatta tired of listening to the two men lie to each other and wandered away. Neither Reave nor the Minstrel Boy noticed that she had gone. It was only when the Minstrel Boy decided that he really had to get a room before he got any drunker that he discovered her absence.

'Now, where the hell did she go?'

Reave looked around Wearily. 'Beats me, pal.' He continued to squint across the room. 'Is that her?'

The Minstrel Boy had some difficulty focusing. 'Where?'

Reave pointed. 'Over there, watching the rope and chain act.'

'That's not her, that woman's wearing clothes.'

The woman at whom Reave was pointing was dressed for luxury travel in a white full-length fur and matching cossack hat, a black

latex bodysuit, and long red boots. A pair of small onyx chandeliers hung from her ears.

'Look at the face. That's her, isn't it?'

She was even wearing makeup.

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'So it is.'

'She said she was cold.'

'Where the hell did she get those clothes from?'

Reave grunted. 'I could hazard a guess.'

The Minstrel Boy waved and shouted. 'Hey, de Luxe, come over here. Where did you get the brand-new outfit?'

Renatta de Luxe sauntered up to the bar, clearly enjoying the effect of her new costume, which had almost as much impact on the crowd as her previous seminudity had. Her attitude was decidedly truculent. 'I was getting tired of standing around freezing my ass off with every man in the place staring at my tits. Since you guys wouldn't take pity on me, I decided to find someone who would.'

The Minstrel Boy looked at her with new respect. 'You got all that in this short a time?'

'It's quality, not quantity, that counts. I can be quite amazing when I want to be.'

'I can believe it.'

'You'd better. I could have stayed with the guy. By the time I'd finished with him, he would have taken me anywhere.'

'But you decided to come back to us?'

'I figured you'd probably be more fun.'

The Minstrel Boy handed her a fresh drink. 'I guess we should be flattered.'

Renatta sipped her martini and nodded. 'Damn right you should be flattered. I'm a prize.'

They were distracted from Renatta's prizeworthiness by a disturbance at the other end of the bar. A bum in filthy rags was about to be ejected by the keepers.

Reave's jaw dropped. 'I don't believe it.'

The Minstrel Boy was confused. 'You don't believe what?'

'Will you look who that is.'

The Minstrel Boy looked. His eyes widened in shock. 'Good God, that's not possible.'

Renatta, who had expected to be the center of attention for a good deal longer, was miffed and confused

'What's all the fuss about? The two of you look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Billy Oblivion.'

'Billy Oblivion?'

Reave moved quickly. 'I'd better spread some money around and

get him out of that.'

While Reave was handing bills to the keepers who wanted to bounce Billy, the Minstrel Boy turned and ordered another round of drinks, including a large cognac for Billy, who looked as if he needed one.

Renatta was all but stamping her feet. 'What's going on here? You actually know that bum?'

'The three of us were a team a long time ago.' He smiled wryly. 'The goddamn DNA Cowboys.'

'And you're getting spooked because you've all turned up in the same place at the same time?'

'I don't like it.'

'Damn it, boy, don't go primitive on me. Coincidences happen.'

The Minstrel Boy's face was grim. 'I fear it's synchronicity, and I hate synchronicity.'

> *One of the more extreme examples of the confusion that was caused by the templating of human beings and the resulting creation of millions of duplicates was, of course, the case of the sylphadese. The sylphadese were hedonist polynomials who occupied a floating river settlement in the Dealveerd sector. Almost by chance, they developed a system of life extension that, while the treatments were maintained, appeared to be a reasonable facsimile of immortality. There was, however, one drawback. The process required a freshly killed human as the basis of the treatment. After some contemplation of the fine shadings of morality, it was decided that the use of specially produced duplicates, provided that they were terminated quickly and humanely immediately after their synthesis, was ethically permissible. A single template was used, and all the victims were reproductions of a healthy young male named Mythlon Mysed.*
>
> *Nobody knows exactly how the template was switched, but suddenly, in the middle of an otherwise routine morning, the Mysed replicas started*

coming out of the receiver cage with a foreknowledge of what was going to happen to them. The first few slaughtered the operators of the stuff center, and then, as their numbers grew, they went on to massacre the entire population of the settlement and finally to sever all contacts with the outside world. When, after a prolonged period of isolation that produced a volume of strange and lurid rumors, relief teams from other settlements in the same sector finally fought their way in, they discovered that an advanced sacrificial blood cult had developed in a society of identical and dangerously deranged males.

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER FIVE

Renatta leaned back in her chair and crossed her long booted legs. 'So the DNA Cowboys are back together?'

Reave and Billy watched the movement. The Minstrel Boy shook his head with a wince. He hated the tag that had been stuck on them through a good part of their career as a trio of all-for-one, one-for-all freebooting partners. He hated it even more than the others did because, inadvertently, it had all been his fault.

'We never called ourselves that, even at the height of the craziness,' he said.

Reave dragged his eyes away from Renatta's legs. 'That was all the work of the people who made up the stories. I swear, we couldn't have done half the stuff that we got blamed for. It wouldn't have been humanly possible.'

It had been years earlier, more years than the Minstrel Boy cared to recall. They had been very young and bold and dumb. At the time of the accidental christening they had been robbing the beer hall at M'Urzank. Despite their weapons, a hard-bitten bartender had decided to act recalcitrant. He had glared at the three of them.

'You think you can walk in here and tell everyone what to do?'

The Minstrel Boy, who had been full of piss, vinegar, and a considerable quantity of gin, had snarled right back at him. 'Sure we can tell you what to do. We're the Cowboys of Instruction.'

For the rest of his days the Minstrel Boy had wondered how those words had free-associated into his head. Maybe it had had something to do with the fact that, at the time, he had been fancying himself a poet.

The bartender had stared at him in disbelief. 'The Cowboys of Instruction?'

The Minstrel Boy should have left it there, but he had been young, and he had plowed right ahead with the gag. He waved his gun with a flourish. 'Right, bubba, we're the DNA code in this cell.'

It had been a drunk in the back of the hall who had roared it our first. 'Shee-it! It's the DNA Cowboys.'

Despite their guns and their intentions of robbery, the whole crowd took up the cry, roaring with laughter and bawling it out.

'Shee-it! It's the DNA Cowboys.'

It was clear that there was now no way that they were going to rob the M'Urzank beer hall without shooting holes in a lot of people just to regain their credibility. Their collective nerve failed them, and after putting a few blasts into the ceiling they had fled the place. Unknown to the other two, however, Billy had gone back the same

night with a Nulite incendiary and torched the beer hall. Despite their ignominious retreat, the name had stuck and the legend had been born.

Billy's head was drooping toward the table top. He was on his fifth brandy. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks were hollow, his skin was gray, and his previously shaved hair had grown in only to thick dark stubble. They had tried to clean him up, but he: still looked like an escaped convict with the plague.

'I don't feel so good.'

Reave was clean out of sympathy. Billy had done nothing but whine since they had rescued him from the keepers and legitimized his presence at the Voice in the Wilderness by promising to be responsible for his upkeep. Diamenti and his men gave short shrift to beggars.

'Of course you don't feel so good. You've spent God knows; how long living on plankton and water and talking to your duplicate until you got so crazy, you beat him to death. Before: that, you were on the run. In the last few days you've been tossed out of a road runner on your head. You wind up in Graveyard, and you mug a guy. You take a load of rubyjewels and only just get out of town with your life. Give us a break, buddy. You deserve to feel bad. It's a natural healthy reaction.'

Billy's head hit the table. 'Oh, Mother of God.'

The four of them had retired to a small private dining room, and they sat one on each side of a square wooden table. Billy, Reave, and the Minstrel Boy were all drinking cognac; Renatta had a bluefrost coldpitcher filled with martinis. It was a plain stone room. It might have looked like a prison cell if the grim effect of the stone had not been softened by the burgundy velvet curtains that covered the narrow window. There was a cast-iron bellpull with which to summon a steward. The room was a good deal more comfortable than the bar, and they were able to talk without being overheard. After Billy's arrival they had no longer been quite so welcome in the Great Hall. Renatta de Luxe had come with them. Without anything actually being said, she seemed to have been accepted into their company for the duration. The duration of *what* was the question that did not seem to have any immediate answer. The conversation kept dragging itself back to the reason they had all shown up in the same place at the same time. Of the three men, the Minstrel Boy was by far the most suspicious, but that had always been the way of it.

'Listen, we've all been around the block enough times to at least keep an open mind about the possibility of there being either a prime or secondary manipulation in the affairs of men.'

Reave did not look terribly impressed. "The affairs of men"?

You're starting to sound like a metaphysician, Minstrel Boy.'

The Minstrel Boy smiled despite himself. 'You know me better than that.'

Billy levered himself upright. 'So why bother us with all this prime manipulation crap? Shit just happens.'

Reave laughed. 'It certainly seems to happen to you.'

Billy scowled. 'That's kind of rich, Reave. Where do you get off taking the moral high ground? How many raids did you go on with Baptiste before you discovered that riding into town and murdering the population wasn't as much fun as it had seemed at first?'

Reave snarled, and if Renatta had not laughed, he might have made a grab for Billy Oblivion. Instead, he rounded on her. 'What's so goddamn funny, lady?'

Renatta was not in the least intimidated. 'I was just thinking what a kick it is, sitting here with the legendary DNA Cowboys while they bicker like small boys. I mean, there was a time when I used to regard you guys like some sort of big deal, but look at you now. One of you's been locked up in a monastery, the other's been in a sexual trance, and the third's been out committing mass murder. You've been out there on the edge withimmortality, sex, and violence, respectively, and when you finally get back together again, all you can do is sit around and bitch at each other. Isn't that enough of a joke?'

Reave leveled a finger at her. 'You didn't ought to talk that way. At best, you're here in the capacity of a rookie, perhaps just a mere concubine.'

Renatta curled her lip right back at him as she poured herself another martini from the coldpitcher. 'Concubine yourself, Jack. It's pathetic. The great adventurers? You're a triple burnout. About the only adventure you seem capable of is the kind that ends up with you running out of the bank into the guns of the entire Bolivian National Guard.'

'The Bolivian National Guard? What in hell are you talking about?'

The Minstrel Boy sipped his brandy. 'It's an arcane cultural reference. I think she's suggesting that there's nothing left for us to do except go out and die in a blaze of glory.'

Billy stared glumly into his drink. 'She might be right.'

Reave scowled. 'Screw that. I'm not ready for a blaze of glory quite yet.'

The Minstrel Boy sat back in his chair and reflected on the others. Already he, Billy, and Reave were falling back into the old patterns. Billy complained, the Minstrel Boy worried, and Reave was the headlong swashbuckler who pulled the other two along with his last enthusiasms. The Minstrel Boy was not even sure he liked the other

two. Individually they struggled and scuffled, but when they operated together there was a special chemistry. As far as he could see, that chemistry was at work again. The Minstrel Boy would not be happy, though, until he knew *why* it was at work. There was also the matter of Renatta. There had always been women, of course, but very few of them had wanted to be part of the team in the way she appeared to. The drunker she got, the more she goaded them, as though trying to shame them back to some imagined state of past glory.

'So what are we ready for?' the Minstrel Boy asked.

'Still looking for the cosmic motivation?'

The Minstrel Boy was a little tired of taking attitude from Billy. So the guy had had it bad. Well, which of them hadn't had it bad at one time or another?

'All I've been trying to say is that I find it more than a coincidence that the three of us have been reunited right whenthe world looks like it's going into the start of a new, all-over phase of violence.'

Renatta looked up. 'What makes you think the world's going into a new, all-over phase of violence? How would you know? You've been holed up in the Caverns all this time.'

'I'm only guessing, but it sure looks like it. The Hunters are loose in the Caverns, Baptiste and his gang are running amok among the stasis towns, and Billy's seen nothing but violence since he left the Sanctuary. Even that river settlement we stumbled into was being blown apart by air pirates.'

For once, Reave was on his side. 'He's right about that. There's trouble all over. Baptiste's bunch isn't the only one out raiding the settlements. It sure seems like something's on the boil.'

'All I know is that the three of us ran as a bonded triad and — '

Reave switched back. 'A bonded triad? Is that what we were? Hell, I thought we were just three guys who hung out and got into trouble together. Where've you been getting all of these high-priced words?'

The Minstrel Boy flashed with drunken irritation. 'Can I get to finish a thought, goddamn it?'

Billy laughed. 'Be our guest.'

The Minstrel Boy picked up the brandy bottle and found that it was empty. That was the last straw. 'This is pointless. I'm going to get another bottle.'

'Why don't you just ring for the steward?'

'I could use the walk. Think about this, though, while I'm gone. I may be crazy for looking for some external force that's brought us together, but if there is one, we'd be in a lot better position if we could figure out what it was.'

Swaying slightly, the Minstrel Boy left the room. Outside in the

corridor, he had to lean against the wall for a moment. He was drunker than he had thought. He took a couple of deep breaths and pushed himself upright again.

'Pull yourself together, boy. You've got to make it to the Great Hall.'

The dim, smoky gaslights that were the only illumination in the corridor refused to keep still as he lurched toward the steps that led down into the hall. His head was swimming, and he started having second thoughts. Maybe he didn't need thewalk, after all. Perhaps he should just go back and call the steward. He stopped, and that moment of hesitation saved his life. Something sharp and metallic struck the stone wall in a flash of sparks, just inches from his head. If he had not halted, the power shirakin that lay humming on the flagstone floor would have been buried deep in his skull.

'What the. .'

There were muffled footfalls behind him. He turned stupidly. His reactions were shot. A shadowy figure came at him. There was a high-voltage crackle, and a foot-long lightslicer glowed into dazzling life. The short ribbon of pure energy was more than capable of carving him into paper-thin strips. The figure launched itself. The Minstrel Boy's body responded more readily than his brain. His legs, with a seeming will of their own, gave way under him and he dropped to his knees. That appeared to be the very last thing his attacker expected. The mystery figure had aimed both its feet in a high flying kick that was supposed to hit either his head or his upper body. As it was, the blow only brushed his shoulder. His assailant overshot and collided with the wall. There was a metallic scream and another shower of sparks, and the lightslicer touched stone.

The Minstrel Boy fell awkwardly. His right arm was twisted behind him, but his fingers were all but touching the Colt auto in the waistband of his pants. His hand closed around it. The attacker had quickly recovered. He swung the lightslicer. The Minstrel Boy rolled. There were more sparks as the bright weapon bit into the flagstones where he had just been lying. His gun was out. He did not bother with the lasersight. He pulled the trigger, firing blindly. The roar was deafening in the narrow corridor. There was a scream, and the lightslicer fell to the floor.

The door to the room he had just left flew open, and light spilled out. Reave was in the corridor with a pistol in each hand. 'What's going on out here?'

The Minstrel Boy lowered the Colt. He was shaking all over from the clash of adrenaline and alcohol. 'Don't shoot! It's me. Someone just tried to kill me.'

'Who?'

The Minstrel Boy got to his feet. He put a hand on the wall to steady himself. 'I don't know. The bastard came right out of the darkness. Like a fucking ninja.'

Reave pushed past him. He seemed more interested in the fallen attacker than in whether the Minstrel Boy was hurt. 'There hasn't been a ninja in two thousand years.'

Reave gingerly picked up the lightslicer and held it out at arm's length, using its crackling radiance to illuminate the body. He let out a low whistle. 'You pretty much got the next best thing.'

The Minstrel Boy straightened up. 'What do you mean?'

'What we've got here looks awfully like an urthugee.'

'You're kidding?'

'If he ain't, he got himself a full darksuit, lightsink panels, and the whole bit. The kali-rouge don't give those away with every major purchase.' He bent down and peeled off the face mask. 'He's got the yellow headband and the facial tattoos. It really looks like he was going to do the full and ancient yuga on your ass.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'I wasted an urthugee? Me?'

'You're quite the stud, boy.'

'This isn't real.'

Reave laughed. 'We know it was really blind luck, but nobody else needs to.'

The Minstrel Boy was not amused. 'What the hell was an urthugee doing coming after me?'

Reave was kneeling over the body. 'That's something you're going to have to think about.'

'I'm well aware of that.'

'And if there are any more where he came from.'

'I wish you hadn't said that.'

Reave was searching the assassin's clothes. The Minstrel Boy looked a little shocked.

'What are you doing? Robbing the corpse?'

Reave slipped a number of small metal objects into his pocket. 'These boys have all kinds of killer trinkets. Things you've never seen before.'

There was the sound of heavy boots coming quickly up the stairs. Reave glanced quickly at the Minstrel Boy. 'Sounds like the local law. Try and look casual.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head in despair. 'Sure, casual.'

It turned out to be not only the local law but also Diamenti himself with his two lieutenants, Axel and Heet. Ramilles Diamenti might not have actually been as big as God, but he was majestically huge. He stood more than seven feet tall and must have weighed over three hundred pounds. Despite his size, though, he seemed to be

possessed by a burning inner energy and was able to move his bulk with surprising agility. He was a presence. His florid cheeks, framed by graying muttonchop side whiskers, told of profound self-indulgence, but his eyes showed a calculating, dynamic intelligence. Even his clothes were larger than life. His purple robe, trimmed with ermine and wolf pelt, was like a tent built for an emperor. The gold chain with its massive sampling cup was like his badge of office, host general in his own kingdom.

His two lieutenants were equally unmistakable. Somewhere along the line Axel had been extensively rebuilt. Over a third of him was crude prosthetics, with servos and circuitry exposed. Heet scarcely looked human — he was totally hairless, and his skin was a bright daffodil yellow. His bare skull was strangely ridged, and his ears were elongated and pointed at the tips.

As Diamenti and his men marched down the corridor, Reave and the Minstrel Boy all but started like small boys caught red-handed at some guilty endeavour. Diamenti's roar could have chilled blood.

'So what do we have here? Been indulging in a little slaying, have we?'

The Minstrel Boy looked Diamenti in the eye and decided that maybe casual was not such a good idea. Even though he was telling the truth, there was something about Diamenti's gaze that made him feel as if he were lying.

'I know it looks bad, but I was only defending myself. He came out of the dark at me.'

'You know the stiff?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'No.'

Reave went a little further. 'We know what he is.'

'And what might that be?'

' He was an urthugee

Diamenti's bushy eyebrows shot up. He turned to Heet. 'Is this true?'

Heet quickly examined the body. 'It sure looks like it.'

Diamenti faced his men. 'I don't want word of this running all over the Great Hall, you understand? Keep your mouths shut.'

The keepers nodded. Diamenti quickly ushered Reave and the Minstrel Boy down the corridor. 'Let's go and talk about this in private.'

The Minstrel Boy and Reave returned to the private dining room, followed by Diamenti and Heet. Billy and Renatta looked startled as the big man and his lieutenant came through the door.

'What's going on out there?'

The Minstrel Boy flopped into a chair. 'Someone tried to kill me. I need a drink.' He glanced up at Diamenti. 'Can I ring for a bottle of

brandy? I was going for one when that guy jumped me.'

Diamenti gestured to Heet. 'Go get him a bottle. We don't need a steward coming up here right now.'

Renatta actually seemed concerned. 'Who tried to kill you?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at Diamenti again. Their host gave an imperceptible shake of his head. The Minstrel Boy avoided Renatta's eyes. 'It seems like it might have been a hired assassin.'

'What?'

Diamenti ignored Billy and Renatta's questions and addressed himself to the Minstrel Boy. 'So who wants you dead?'

'Nobody. I don't have a beef with anyone anymore. I've been out of circulation since God knows when.'

Renatta stared into her martini. She looked worried. 'I can vouch for that.'

'Where were you?'

'In the Caverns of the Presence.'

Diamenti smiled. 'Living the lotus life?'

'I needed the rest.'

'So why did you leave?'

'I didn't like the way things were going. People were getting jaded and weird, and the Hunters were out. I figured that some kind of cull was about to start.'

Diamenti turned his attention to Billy and Reave. 'Maybe someone wants to stop this little reunion.'

Reave's eyes narrowed. 'What reunion might that be?'

Diamenti grinned. 'Come on. The whole of the Great Hall is talking about it. The DNA Cowboys are back together.'

'We never called ourselves that.'

'We aren't back together.'

'It's pure coincidence.'

'Are you telling me that, right at a point when the wholeDamaged World seems to be on the edge of another round of violence, you three suddenly turn up in the same place at the same time, quite by accident?' It was the Minstrel Boy's argument almost word for word.

'You can believe it or not. It's what happened.'

Diamenti shrugged. 'It doesn't really matter if I believe it or not. Everybody else believes it, and I figure that you're going to have to go along with it.'

He had a point there. General perception was a powerful force. Billy, who had been staring morosely into his drink, suddenly looked up at Diamenti. There was an odd light in his eye. 'Yeah, but do you believe it?'

Diamenti looked at Billy curiously. 'Is it important?'

'You really think that another cycle of violence is coming?'

'Haven't you felt it for yourself?'

Billy's hands made an awkward gesture. 'I've been on a bit of a vacation myself.'

'Then the answer is yes, Billy Oblivion. Yes, there is another round of violence coming. The moods of civilizations change, even in a fragmented civilization like ours. It's the inevitable turnaround, day and night, summer and winter. All we can do is weather it.'

The Minstrel Boy raised a questioning eyebrow. 'Doesn't it seem like this is shaping up to be a particularly hard winter?'

Diamenti nodded. 'It does rather look like that.'

'Maybe we won't weather it.'

Diamenti smiled. 'Maybe we won't. I'm something of a fatalist in these things. After all, there's only one death per customer.'

At that moment Heet returned with a bottle of very good cognac and cut short the philosophy. It must have come from Diamond's private stock. Despite all the trouble they were in, the Minstrel Boy examined it admiringly. 'This is excellent.'

Heet was not alone. Axel was with him. He whispered something to Diamenti and then handed him two small objects. Diamenti placed them on the table where everyone could see them.

'These were on the body. Do they mean anything to you?'

The Minstrel Boy felt his blood chill. One was a small gold insignia — a tiny sword. The other was a wafer of transparent crystal. He glanced quickly at Renatta. She also looked frightened.

'The sword is the insignia of the Hunters in the Caverns,'he replied. 'The crystal is one of the wafers they give to their designated victims.'

'And you were a designated victim?'

'They hit on me just as I was leaving.'

'They seem to have followed you here.'

The Minstrel Boy did not believe what he was seeing. 'This isn't possible. The Hunters are just a bunch of localized sickos. They couldn't track me across the nothings, let alone employ an urthugee.'

Billy Oblivion was stunned. 'An urthugee?'

Diamenti shot him a hard look. 'We're trying to keep that to ourselves.'

Billy nodded. 'I can understand that. What I don't understand is how come an urthugee is working for these Hunters. Like the Minstrel Boy says, they're just localized sickos.'

Diamenti's face was grave. 'Things change. The kali-rouge Yuba is supposed to last 200,000 years before Shiva is finally slain by the goddess and chaos takes over. Perhaps the goddess has done a deal with the Presence. You can pick up a lot of strange allies in 200,000 years.'

Reave was shaking his head. 'That's ridiculous. All this is legend.'

'What isn't these days?'

'Hell, I don't know.'

'The evidence is on the table.'

Billy picked up the tiny gold sword and turned it between his fingers. 'The immediate question is what you're going to do about this. It's your place — you call the shot.'

Diamenti poured a sizable shot of cognac into his sampling cup. He seemed to be thinking. 'You'll all have to leave here. That goes without saying.'

Billy started to protest. 'Why do Reave and I have to leave? It's only the Minstrel Boy that's in trouble.'

'Can you be sure of that? The world sees you as a trio. All for one, one for all, and the rest of the male bonding rituals.'

'It's those words again.'

Diamenti went on. 'I'm not going to argue about it. I want the three of you out of here inside of forty-eight hours. You're trouble, and that's all the cause I need. If you'll take a piece of good advice, though, I'd stick with each other for the moment. Times are getting rough, and you three always do well in roughtimes. You may not like the idea anymore, but you'll find that you're a lot less vulnerable as a triad.'

The DNA Cowboys were silent. The reunion was beginning to look inevitable.

Diamenti finished his brandy. 'Forty-eight hours. It'd be better if you kept away from the public halls during that time. I don't want any young hopeful trying to score a rep by taking a crack at one of you. To make things easier, I'm going to detail Heet to keep an eye on the three of you, just to make sure there's no more trouble.'

Reave looked Heet up and down. 'I'll feel a whole lot safer.'

Heet grinned. He appeared to have stainless-steel teeth. 'I'll take good care of you boys. There is one thing, though.'

'What's that?'

The grin broadened. 'Don't get me excited. I tend to get lycanthropic fits when I get excited.'

With that, Diamenti and his henchmen left them. The three stared at each other in glum silence.

The Minstrel Boy was the first to speak. 'I'm not sure that I can handle this.'

Reave wearily massaged his temples. 'You were the one who kept saying that it was preordained, that dark forces were at work.'

Billy glared at both of them. 'He knew that he was in the shit, and he wanted to enlist our help to save his ass. Trouble was, he couldn't just come out and say it. He came out with all this mystic crap instead.'

The Minstrel Boy came half out of his chair. 'That's a fucking lie and you know it. How in hell could I know that you two would be here?'

Reave interposed. 'Hold it! Hold it!'

Billy, who had been ready to take on the Minstrel Boy, fell back in his chair. 'All I know is that there ain't no urthugees after me.'

'Can you be sure of that?'

Renatta could not hold back her laughter any longer. 'Will you guys look at yourselves? When are you going to accept that, like it or not, you're back in business?'

Reave sighed. 'She's right. There's no fighting it.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly nodded. Billy Oblivion was the last to give in. Finally he sagged in surrender.

'Damn.'

> *The great inevitable and tragic thread in all of human history was the regular and cyclic plunge into mindless violence. It is incontestable fact that, despite all aspirations to morality and rationality, human beings seemed incapable of containing and controlling their base instinct for slaughter and destruction. Almost like planetary seasons, any period of calm and enlightenment would gradually decay to that critical point where it would be consumed in a frenzied outburst of mass murder.*
>
> *— Pressdra Vishnaria*

CHAPTER SIX

The Minstrel Boy's wrists and ankles were tied with silk scarves, and his face was covered in makeup. First she had tied him, and then she had very carefully painted his eyes and lips. She had even outlined his nipples in red and purple. She had laughed when he had become a little impatient.

'I'm just making you beautiful for me.'

It was almost like being back in the Caverns. Renatta was straddling his stretched-out body. With total control, she rode him like a trained animal, flicking him with her long, gold false fingernails when he failed to please her. He let out a long, deep-throated gasp, part pain and part pleasure. The bodysuit and the cossack hat had gone, but she had retained the long red boots and the earrings, and the white fur was draped around her shoulders. Her mass of black curly hair hung down over her face, although it was still possible to see her eyes sparkle and her teeth gleam white in the diffused glow. When the Minstrel Boy opened his eyes, he could see multiple reflections of himself in the faceted dome overhead. He watched as Renatta languorously crawled down the length of his torso. He extended his tongue, running it over any part of her that presented itself.

Although Ramilles Diamenti had ordered them out of his realm, for the short time that they had left to them they had been given carte blanche to order the best of everything. Reave and Billy had been introduced to a partying group of very attractive women and had retired to their individual chambers. Renatta had insisted that the Minstrel Boy take the best, specialty equipped love suite that the Voice in the Wilderness had to offer It was in the Round Tower, a large circular chamber with a feeler bed and a bubbling steam pool under a dome of hexagonal mirrors. Something seemed to have really aroused Renatta. Thenwas a razor edge to her sexual hunger that night. The Minstrel Boy could not quite believe that it was just his animal magnetism, and he wondered what exactly it was that had so excited her. Could it be that the idea of making love to one of the famous — and now reunited — DNA Cowboys drove her crazy? A much more sinister idea was that the heat was being generated by the knowledge that he had just killed a man. He had been involved before with women who were turned on by killers. He was never able to quite relax around them. There was always the nagging fear of role reversal.

The Minstrel Boy had no difficulty relaxing on this particular night. The chamber was geared to total creature comfort. There was

soft, silver mossfur beneath him, perfume wafted through the air, and the bubbling of the water in the pool blended with high harmonic chimes like the calling of electronic birds. Sleep, as opposed to relaxation, was a different matter. It was a number of hours before Renatta was finally sated and he was able to doze. It was in the middle of that dozing, while he was uneasily dreaming about being hunted across fields of stone by dark figures waving gold swords, that the entry buzzer started sounding impatiently.

Renatta sat bolt upright. 'What the hell is that?'

'Quickly, untie my hands.'

She fumbled with the silk scarves. When he was loose, he slid across the bed and scooped up his gun. He pointed it at the hexagonal door that he estimated would take only minimal effort to break down. 'Who's there?'

A familiar voice came from without. 'It's me, Reave. Billy's with me.'

The Minstrel Boy lowered the Colt. 'Come on in.'

He hit the door response, and it slid back. As the other two ducked through the low entrance, Renatta wrapped the fur around herself.

'This is a weird time to come calling.'

Billy looked at her and shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Renatta, but Reave and I got to talking, and we decided that it was a good idea to leave as soon as we could.'

Billy looked considerably better. He was freshly shaved, except for his darkening scalp. He had found himself a somewhat somber black travel suit with polymesh facing, which gave him a strangely ecclesiastical air that the Minstrel Boy decided must be some emotional hangover from the Sanctuary. It placed a new twist on his traditional role as the con man and manipulator of the trio. Was Billy going to be the mad vicar of the troupe?

The Minstrel Boy sat down on the bed. 'Leave? You mean leave here? I assume we're going together just like everyone wants us to?'

Reave and Billy were stiff and awkward, almost formal.

'That's right.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly nodded. It really was inevitable. 'But why leave now? Diamenti gave us forty-eight hours.'

'That's why we thought it might be a good idea to get going as soon as we can.'

The Minstrel Boy blinked. 'I'm not following this. I'm half-asleep. Has someone else been killed?'

'No, nothing like that. We just thought it might be wise to get a jump on anyone who was thinking about laying for us.'

Billy picked up the explanation. His voice sounded together and

rational. 'It's like this. Everyone here knows that Diamenti has given us forty-eight hours to get out of town. They're going to expect us to wait around drinking it up until the deadline. That would be the time when anyone who wanted to take a crack at us would try it. This way we just drift off into the night, and if they come to look for us, we'll be gone.'

The Minstrel Boy stretched. He wondered if Billy's seeming recovery was permanent. 'It does make a certain kind of sense.'

'So?'

'Sure, let's get going. How are we going to travel, and where are we going to head for?'

'That's what we wanted to talk to you about.'

'We heard you had a submarine.'

The Minstrel Boy sat down again. 'I sold it.'

'Damn.'

'Maybe you could buy it back again.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled and shook his head. 'I doubt I've got enough money, and anyway, a submarine isn't exactly the most flexible means of transport.'

'So what do we do?'

Reave hitched up his pants. 'If you're talking flexible, there's nothing more flexible than a lizard.'

Billy grimaced. 'That's really doing it the hard way.'

For once the Minstrel Boy agreed with him. 'Yeah, Reave, you may be callused and saddle sore, but I came down here with an ass as soft as a baby's.'

Reave was not convinced. 'I've already got a lizard in the stables, and I'm sure we could get *two* more out of Diamenti.'

There was a sudden awkward silence. Everyone looked at Renatta sitting cross-legged on the circular bed.

'So you finally remembered about me?'

The Minstrel Boy was embarrassed. 'You want to come with us?'

'I don't want to stay here.'

'It could get rough.'

'It's been real easy up to now, hasn't it?'

'Okay, so we ask Diamenti for three lizards.'

The Minstrel Boy was not sold on the idea of trekking on lizardback. 'Maybe we could do better than lizards. Wasn't Heet supposed to be keeping an eye on us?'

'He's outside waiting.'

The Minstrel Boy started pulling on his pants. 'So let's bring him in. I assume that he knows about this plan to split right now.'

'Oh, sure. I think he and his boss can't wait to see the back of us.'

'Maybe we can get a deal on something.'

Heet ducked through the entrance. He looked at the Minstrel Boy and Renatta and the messed-up bed. His expression was disapproving. The Minstrel Boy grinned, wondering how a Puritan managed to survive in a place like the Voice in the Wilderness.

'Greetings, Heet, I hope the old lycanthropy isn't acting up.'

Heet bared his steel fangs. 'You're a funny guy, Minstrel Boy. You wanna watch someone don't rip your sense of humor out.'

'Listen, Heet, you can speak for your boss, right?'

Heet nodded suspiciously. 'In most things.'

'So we need transportation out of here, and we were wondering if we could get a deal on some sort of rough-country ground vehicle.'

The yellow man tugged at a pointed ear. 'What you got to pay for it with?'

'I've got the balance on my submarine, and Reave could throw in his lizard.'

Heet gave him a baleful look. 'The sub was stolen from the Caverns.'

'That never bothered Diamenti in the past.'

'The lizard's probably stolen, too.'

'Can you make us a deal or not?'

Heet was thoughtful. 'There might be something I can do for you.'

'Yeah?'

'There's an old Saab battlewagon parked out on the terrace that might be in your price range. The previous owners died in a card game.'

Reave was suddenly interested. 'A Saab?'

'I'll even throw in the heat ray.'

Heet was turning into a bizarre salesman. The DNA Cowboys took the bait. Billy grinned.

'It sounds like us.'

Reave nodded. 'It does rather.'

The Minstrel Boy cinched the deal. 'I've seen it, and it looks okay.'

Reave faced Heet. 'You'll give it to us for the balance on the submarine and the lizard?'

Heet flashed the steel. 'Boss'll go along with that.'

He stuck out a hand. They shook in turn.

Renatta was dressing, pulling up her long red boots and smoothing them to the contours of her legs. 'So we're riding in a tank?'

'You have a problem with that?'

She ran a finger down her thigh. 'Hell, no. It seems sort of apt, and it's certainly better than riding a lizard.'

The deal done, they moved quickly. First there was the inspection of the battlewagon. While Heet was around, they complained bitterly about flaws, defects, and worn parts. And indeed they had some

reason. When they started the drive, it crackled with plasma and leaked fluids. The biode was taciturn and easily irritated, and the previous owners had been far from fastidious. The interior of the vehicle was filthy, surfaces were thick with grime, and corners were solid with compacted garbage. The cabin stank of urine and decay. It was sufficiently bad that when Renatta insisted that the inside be cleaned out before they acceptthe craft, Heet did not complain and went off to find a couple of house epsilons to do the job. Once he was out of earshot there was a great deal of jubilation.

Reave was grinning. 'The DNA Cowboys have their own goddamn tank!'

Renatta was not altogether sold on the tank 'I thought you didn't call yourselves that.'

Reave was too pleased with their acquisition to pay her any mind. 'Whatever. We still got our own tank.' He climbed inside. 'The rest of it may look like shit, but the weapons systems have been perfectly maintained. The dead guys may have been pigs, but they were also heavy pros.'

The Minstrel Boy was drawing patterns in the dirt on the Saab's bodywork. 'If they were such heavyweights, how come they got killed over a card game?'

'Maybe they were playing with each other.'

Reave was going over the weapons, checking each gun port in turn, swiveling on the jockey stool, getting the feel of the twin particle throwers.

'Whoever looked after these babies really loved their work. We're talking firepower here. With something like this at the point, you could easily put a sizable raiding force behind you.'

The Minstrel Boy, who was getting his own feel of the biode, raised an eyebrow. 'I thought you'd had enough of that sort of thing.'

Reave looked torn. 'Yeah, I don't want to go off burning no towns. It just seems that everything's got so antsy out there that aggression's sometimes the only answer. There's always some bastard who wants to pick on you, so why not pick first? Besides, with all this firepower, it'd be good to have something to shoot at.'

Billy sighed. 'That's one way of looking at it.'

The Minstrel Boy turned in his seat. 'There's a difference between copping an attitude and sinking into barbarian twilight.'

Reave grunted. 'I'm not so sure that barbarian twilight ain't the next thing on the menu.'

Billy was already strapping himself into a passenger berth. 'Are we going to spend the next few hours talking philosophy, or are we going to get going?'

The Minstrel Boy engaged the drive. Blue smoke drifted through

the cabin. Its hum had a harsh arrhythmic quality.

Renatta looked concerned. 'Is that drive going to last?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'It'll go; it's just cranky.'

He grasped the control levers but did not merge with the biode. He wanted the old-fashioned pleasure of actually driving the tank. He made a neat three-point turn and started down the terrace, away from the main building. For something so bulky, the Saab was easily maneuverable.

'Unless anyone has a better idea, I was going to go into the nothings, get beyond the backwash, and let the lizardbrain see what it can come up with.'

'Do we have any idea where we want to go?' Renatta asked.

The Minstrel Boy observed that she still was not grasping the basics of travel in the nothings. 'It's not where we want to go, it's where we can go. We see what stasis we can lock to and then assess the situation.'

'So we play it by ear?'

'There never was any other option.'

They slid into the nothings. The Saab began bucking and rolling as if it were going through a simulation of rough terrain. The Minstrel Boy went into the biode and discovered that the previous owners had deliberately programmed it that way.

'What the hell were they? Gluttons for punishment?'

The biode did not condescend to provide him with an answer. The Minstrel Boy wrote in an adjustment on the ride illusion. In a matter of moments they were running as smoothly as a luxury limo.

As soon as they entered the nothings, a tension started growing inside the tank's cramped cabin that was more than just the normal unease at being so close to the completely alien environment. It was the realization that they had embarked on something new, with no idea what direction it might take or how it would come out in the end. There was no turning back. Billy's mind kept morbidly returning to the earlier talk of going out in a blaze of glory: Eventually the time came when there was nothing else to do but die.

They did not even have an answer to the most immediate question. How were they going to relate to each other through long hours cooped up in the Saab? The Minstrel Boy wondered what was going to become of his sexual liaison with Renatta.

Were they going to travel celibate, or did she intend to spread her favors to all three of them? With Renatta, the Minstrel Boy couldn't hazard a guess, and he did not particularly want to discuss it with her in front of the other two. He glanced at where she was curled up in the forward gun position. She didn't seem about to volunteer anything. He decided that he would drive the tank and let nature take

its course.

'I'm scoping on the lizardbrain. You want to see what I got?'

Everyone nodded. The Minstrel Boy stroked a control glove, and a display pseudosurface curved around the driver's berth. Three points of light hung in the air. One was much brighter than the other two.

Reave swung down from the rear gunner's chair and ducked behind the Minstrel Boy. 'What's the bright one?'

'That's a place called Santa Freska — it ain't very big, but it's extremely relative to us. I don't have a make yet on the other two. I just know that they're there.'

'What's this Santa Freska? I've never been there.'

'Sun bunnies, Cobalt 90s, a few local bandidos, and a lot of rock bathers. It's hot enough to bake your brain. Big pseudosun and desert terrain. Focal point is an oasis settlement, Santa Freska Town.'

'You want to go for it?'

'I don't see why not. We may be able to strike out for somewhere larger. I'd be a lot happier if we were in a largish city with plenty of action and natural color. These isolated realities are getting too damn weird.'

Reave nodded. 'I think you're probably right.'

'I am right.' The Minstrel Boy turned in his seat. 'You two want to go into Santa Freska?'

Neither Billy nor Renatta seemed particularly concerned.

'Sure, whatever.'

'I never heard of it.'

Billy's mind had seemed to come and go since they had left the Voice in the Wilderness. Right at that moment he seemed to be completely normal, but there was no telling when he would suddenly distance out into a self-created trance.

The Minstrel Boy concentrated. 'I'm locking on to it.'

They came out of the nothings onto flat scrub desert. They were following a poorly maintained dirt road that had been plowed and furrowed by dozens of wheeled vehicles. The Minstrel Boy spread the treads to make it a less rocky ride. He opened the armored covers on the windshield and dogged back the side ports. Hot, dry air poured into the Saab. It was something of a shock, but it did help blow away the smell of confinement. At first there was nothing except flat, featureless desert with dry brush, stunted yucca trees, and outcrops of red ocher rock that glittered with deposits of crystal.

'So where's this oasis?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. 'I guess we'll get to it eventually. They seem to have a lot of area stabilized here.'

Billy looked at the scenery with distrust. 'Who in their right mind would go to all the trouble of stabilizing a stinking desert?'

'Some people like this shit.'

Billy shook his head as though still amazed at the things people could like. 'I'm with you, Minstrel Boy. The sooner we get to a nice big city, the better I'll like it.'

'You were run out of Litz, weren't you?'

'If you remember, we were all run out of Litz.'

'There are plenty of other cities.'

Renatta was hanging out of the side port, squinting ahead into the slipstream. 'There's something up there.'

'What is it?'

'I can't quite see. It looks like a mast or some kind of antenna. . oh, God! I don't believe this.'

Now everyone could see it. The Minstrel Boy slowed the Saab to a stop. It was a body hanging from a tall pole, a man who had been creatively mutilated.

'This is not a good start.'

'He doesn't look like a native.'

What garments remained on the hanged man were more appropriate to a neoprimitive warrior than to the kind of mind-roasted sun worshiper the Minstrel Boy had expected to find in Santa Freska. His hair was plastered up into a coxcomb of high spikes, and he wore ceramic chest and shoulder guards; the tattered black loincloth was stiff with dried blood, as was the streaming horsehair sporran that hung between his legs.

'You telling me that this is what they do to strangers?'

The Minstrel Boy engaged the drive again and started forward down the road. Billy immediately protested.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Heading in to see what's going on here.'

'Do we want to know what's going on here? The stiff on the gibbet clearly wasn't intended to encourage tourists, so why don't we take them at their word? Why don't we just turn around and go back the way we came?'

'Because I think this is Santa Freska Town coming up now.'

The Saab was cresting a low hill. In front of them, a circle of palms and a tangle of smaller vegetation was a flourish of cool green against the drab desert.

'It looks like someone trashed the place.'

Black smoke poured from a blue dome in among the trees. Flames flickered from a gaping hole in the side. One end of a low flat-roofed structure had fallen into rubble. A burning ground car lay on its roof beside the road. As they got closer, it was possible to see the bodies on the ground in the shade of the palms and the black, flapping shapes that moved in among them. The Minstrel Boy once again halted the

Saab before actually entering the town. Reave effortlessly assumed command.

'Okay, let's have the covers down and the gun ports manned. We're going to go in, but we're going to do it slow and careful.'

Billy did not look too happy about the idea, but he kept quiet. Reave turned his attention to Renatta, who was tentatively grasping the handgrips of the particle thrower.

'Do you know how to fire that thing?'

She nodded. 'It looks pretty straightforward.'

He leaned in and fine-tuned the sight fix. 'That'll be better.' He glanced up at the Minstrel Boy. 'Okay, let's move but take it real easy.'

Before whatever violence had taken place, the oasis must have been an idyllic spot. It was only when the Saab was in among the trees that its occupants realized just how big they were and how, in fact, there was a whole small town down in the cool shade. The tank came around the burning dome and turned into what was the equivalent of a main street. On one side there was the water of the oasis itself. Flamingos and other wading birds stood unconcernedly in the shallows while human bodies still floated in the water. All around there were the scars of gunfire and explosions. Two buildings were demolished completely, and an imposing wooden building with a sign proclaiming itself "El Cantina" had taken a bad beating. There were more wrecked vehicles and yet more bodies.

If anything, the flapping black things were more of a shock than the bodies. The Minstrel Boy had assumed that they were regular buzzards. They were not. Much larger than buzzards, they were some unholy, and probably wholly fabricated, hybrid of the vulture and the leather-winged pterodactyl. They tore, ripped, and haggled over the flesh of the dead. On the ground they moved like vultures; they had the same hooked beak but were completely without feathers, and their wings were thick membranes like the creaking shrouds of huge carrion bats. The Minstrel Boy could not believe that anyone could deliberately create anything so disgusting.

There were also humans, stooped figures in dark dirty rags, moving among the carnage stripping the corpses. The raiding party that must have swept through had its own hyena camp followers. When they saw the tank, they cut and ran, scrambling aboard the most verminous tent rail the Minstrel Boy had ever seen, a smoke-belching flatbed with a crude frame superstructure covered in rotting canvas and tattered hides. It took off, hightailing it down the road away from the oasis even while the last of the scavengers were still struggling to swing themselves aboard. Renatta fired a shot after them but misjudged the range.

'Always compensate for a target that's moving away from you,'

Reave told her.

'I'll learn.'

He beamed encouragingly. 'Sure you will.'

Billy was thoughtful. His normality seemed to be holding. 'If things like that have started following these raiders, the situation must have deteriorated since Reave was running with Baptiste.'

'Sure as hell weren't creeps like that following our trail. Baptiste would have wasted them.'

The Minstrel Boy halted the Saab in front of El Cantina. 'Do you ever get the feeling that we're traveling through the end of civilization?'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy looked around as Billy let out an unexpected laugh.

'If anyone deserved a role in that, it's got to be us.' Billy even seemed to be recovering his personality.

They waited a full five minutes without seeing any sign of life except what they had started to call the vulture bats.

'Looks as though the town's dead. Maybe we should get outand have a walk around, see what we can see,' Reave suggested.

Nobody seemed to want to be the first to move. Finally Reave took a pistol from the rack beside his gun position. 'I suppose you all want me to take the point?'

'We thought you'd never ask.'

He checked the charge on his first pistol and slid it into his belt, then picked up the second one. 'Okay, so pop the side hatch.'

The Minstrel Boy raised the gull-wing door on the left side of the tank, the side that was facing the oasis. It was unlikely that an attack would come from the water, and there was always the chance that a straggler or a survivor, still with a weapon, might be lurking inside one of the buildings. Reave would have the battlewagon between him and that possibility.

The Minstrel Boy glanced at Billy. 'You have a weapon?'

'Only a sleeve needler.'

Billy had always had a taste for small, easily concealed weapons. They might be handy in a bar or boudoir, but as street sweepers they were pretty well useless. The Minstrel Boy looked to Renatta. 'How about you?'

She shook her head. 'I don't have a weapon at all.'

The Saab's previous owner had left a rack of small arms: a selection of handguns and three heavyweight von Essen shattertubes, the kind that fired blasts of hardened ice. The Minstrel Boy passed one over to Billy and took one himself. He grinned at Renatta.

'Why don't you move up into the top turret and cover us until we know that everything's okay.'

She nodded. She did not seem to have any desire to venture outside. 'Okay.'

Billy and the Minstrel Boy dropped through the hatch. As they stood beside Reave, Billy jerked a thumb back at the tank, indicating Renatta. 'If anything goes down, she's just as likely to blow us away by mistake.'

Reave glanced back through the hatch. 'Lighten up. She's okay.'

The Minstrel Boy eyed Reave silently. He was being uncharacteristically pleasant to Renatta. Reave did not notice the look and gestured with one of his pistols.

'Shall we get on with this?'

They cautiously emerged from the cover of the Saab. They spread out and started slowly to cross the street toward El Cantina. The vulture bats hissed and barked at them and rattled their wings, but nothing else stirred.

'We ought to wipe out those things before we leave here,' Reave said.

They took a couple more paces, and then Billy froze. 'Something moving inside the cantina!'

They stood their ground, weapons at the ready. The door of the cantina creaked. A figure tottered out onto the covered walk.

It was a man, covered in blood and with an ugly blast wound in his chest. It was amazing that he was able to stand at all. He clutched a long-barreled pistol in his right hand and was desperately trying to raise it with the last of his strength.

'You. . scum. . bastards.'

Billy looked urgently at Reave. 'Shall I finish him?'

'Hold your fire.'

As Reave spoke, the man's legs gave way and he collapsed to the boards of the walk. The three of them ran to where he was lying. As they gathered around him, his lips began to move. It was clearly agony for him to talk.

'What. . did we. . ever do. . to you?'

Reave knelt beside him. 'We're not with them. We're just travelers. What happened here?'

The nerves on the left-hand side of the man's face spasmed uncontrollably.

'I. . my partner. . inside. .'

Billy stiffened and raised his gun. He peered into the dark interior of the cantina. 'You think it's a trap?'

'I doubt it.'

'This one's dead.'

Billy edged up to the doorway. The Minstrel Boy automatically backed him up. The old habits were coming back.

Billy whispered instructions. 'You go left.'

'Whatever you say.'

'So let's get to it.'

Billy hit the door. The Minstrel Boy was right behind him. They peeled off in opposite directions, flattening themselves against the wall.

'God, it stinks in here.'

The cantina was filled with the stench of violent death. There were bodies everywhere. From what was left of them, it looked as though the local bandidos had made their stand there. Many were not just the victims of a firefight — they had been tortured and mutilated. The raiders seemed to have staged a vicious grand finale. Billy and the Minstrel Boy stiffened as someone groaned. It was hard to see after the brightness outside.

'Over there, by the bar.'

The man seemed to be actually hanging on the bar, head sagging, knees bent, and arms outstretched. 'Help. . me.'

They moved toward him. Broken glass crunched under their boots. It was only when they came close that they saw the black iron spikes driven through his forearms and into the dark polished wood of the bar top. He had literally been nailed to the bar.

'Water. .'

Billy ducked behind the bar and found an unbroken bottle of mineral water. He handed it to the Minstrel Boy, who was kneeling beside the crucified bandido. The Minstrel Boy held the bottle to the bandido's lips. 'Here, drink this.'

The bandido swallowed with difficulty. He had trouble keeping his head up. 'Thanks.'

Sunlight shafted into the cantina as Reave came through the door. 'All secure in here?'

'There's this one guy left alive.'

'God, this is a mess.'

The Minstrel Boy gave the bandido a second drink. 'Who did this?' he asked.

The bandido eased the weight oo his arms. 'You. . kill me, huh? I. . can't stand any more of this.'

'Just tell us who did this.'

'He. . called himself Ravaj Taraquin. . Taraquin's Irregulars. There were some. . thirty guns. . plus a. . tribe of neoprimitives. . maybe fifty or sixty more. . We didn't have a chance.'

'That's more men than Baptiste had,' Reave commented.

The bandido jerked his head. 'Baptiste. .'

'What about him?'

'They. . were meeting him. Taraquin's Irregulars were. . going to

link up with Baptiste's army and storm Idleberg.'

Idleberg was a town of modest size.

'This is getting serious,' the Minstrel Boy said.

There was a rustling behind them — a vulture bat had waddled through the door Reave had left open. In pure reaction, Reave shot it dead. Within seconds more of the creatures were jostling through the door, drawn by the fresh kill. Reave cursed and rushed at them, lashing out with his boots. When he had finally driven them all out, he tossed the one he had shot after them. 'I'm going to kill every one of those goddamn things. I swear.'

The bandido let out a groan. 'He had them made.'

'Who did?'

'Taraquin. . He created those vulture things. . he had a template. He made them. . to leave behind. . like a calling card.'

'This Taraquin's a psychotic.'

'Kill. . me. The pain. .'

The Minstrel Boy stood up. 'Can't something be done for him?'

The bandido's voice was a sob. 'I've had it. . just stop the pain.'

Reave looked at the Minstrel Boy. 'You can only do him like he's asking.'

The Minstrel Boy drew his Colt and pointed it at the bandido's head but hesitated before he fired. 'I don't know about this.'

Reave didn't wait any longer. In one smooth, almost casual motion, he raised a pistol and shot the man squarely between the eyes. 'Now let's get the hell out of here.'

Back out in the sun, the Minstrel Boy shuddered. 'This shit is getting out of hand.'

Reave looked back once at the cantina and then walked purposefully toward the Saab. 'I'm going to turn the heat ray on that place.'

Billy, Renatta, and the Minstrel Boy watched the cantina burn as Reave proved as good as his word. Using both pistols, he systematically slaughtered the vulture bats. The four of them were taking a last depressed look around before leaving the ruins of Santa Freska when they heard the whine of the rocket motor. Reave immediately went into action.

'Incoming aircraft! Spread out, under cover! Billy, get back in the tank, on-line the ground-to-air.'

'You got it.'

At first it was just a dot on the horizon, flying low and following the path of the road. Even when it came closer, it was still hard to make out any details. Only when it made a slow circle of the oasis was the reason for their confusion clear. It was a flying man, or at least a humanoid shape, riding the air with a dorsal jetpack strapped across

his shoulders. After a second circuit the flier altered the attitude of his body, hovered, and slowly dropped, boots first, for a soft landing beside the tank.

'I'm looking for Rajav Taraquin.'

The Minstrel Boy muttered under his breath. 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume.'

Renatta looked at him as though he had gone mad. 'What?'

'Arcane cultural reference.'

'You're nuts.'

If the newcomer had had any more steel or ceramic grafted to his body, he would have ceased to qualify as human. Even as he was, he was still very close to the verge of robothood. His head was totally enclosed in a massive, featureless bullet helmet. A huge yoke collar and chest plate, which must have housed his control systems and biode, extended over his back to where the weightless dorsal mounting held the rocket motor in position. Motion servos had been built into his biceps, and his hands ended in the blunt steel fists of his multiple-function assault gloves. More ropes of servos ran down his thighs to a pair of boots that could have held up a mobile crane. Power calipers helped support his overall weight. Even his voice was amplified and electronically enhanced.

Reave stepped out of cover and faced the flying man. 'Taraquin's been through here, but he's gone already.'

'That's too bad. Are you some of his men?'

'Just a party of honest travelers.'

Renatta and the Minstrel Boy stepped out into the open. They held their weapons down at their sides but were braced for action.

The flying man spread his huge metal hands. 'I really mean you no harm.'

As if to prove his point, he began to unscrew the bullet helmet, then lifted it over his head. The uncovered face was a complete contrast to the rest of him. It was soft and feminine. Large brown eyes were framed by long lashes, and soft, damp curls fell over his forehead. Stripped of the electronics, his voice was high and girlish. 'That's better; it gets hot in there.'

Reave nodded. 'I'm sure it does.'

'The name is Jet Ace.'

Reave nodded again. 'Reave Mekonta.'

Jet Ace held out one of his gloves in greeting. Reave touched it briefly.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Jet Ace. This here's the Minstrel Boy, and the lady's Renatta de Luxe.'

He omitted to mention Billy, who was still sitting in the tank. Jet Ace smiled. His soft, almost shy smile was wholly at odds with the

ponderous metalbound way in which the rest of him moved.

'Haven't I maybe heard of you guys?' he asked.

'It's possible.'

'You're heroes, right?'

Reave firmly shook his head. 'No, not us. We're just travelers.'

'I'm a hero.'

'No kidding?'

'At least I will be, when I've made a name for myself.'

'Jet Ace is a good name for a hero.'

The Minstrel Boy asked the obvious question. 'Why were you looking for Taraquin?'

'I thought that I might hook up with his army. I'm something of a one-man air force.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded thoughtfully. 'I can imagine that.' He looked pointedly around at the carnage that had once been Santa Freska. 'From the way he left this place, it doesn't seem that this Taraquin is very pleasant person. Probably a psychopath. Hardly a suitable companion for a hero.'

Jet Ace slowly turned, shuffling his enormous boots. He took in the ravaged town. 'I see what you mean. Perhaps it would be a better idea if I was to kill him.'

'That would be one way of making a name for yourself.'

'I have this lizardbrain implant, and I sometimes become a little confused regarding my ultimate goals.'

'That's understandable.'

The Minstrel Boy leaned close to Reave and whispered in his ear. 'This guy's loaded out of his mind on cyclatrol.'

'You think so?'

'Sure, look at the way he's sweating. He's been finding hisown way through the nothings for too long. He's crazy. He's in worse shape than Billy.'

'He's also built like a human fighter plane.'

'That should make life interesting for someone. Let's hope it's not us.'

Jet Ace had moved off and was looking at the bodies under the palms. 'The more I think about this, the more I believe that it would be a very good idea to kill Ravaj Taraquin.'

'A lot of people might be real grateful.'

'You think so?'

'I tell you what. If it's any help to you, we heard where Taraquin was heading.'

Jet Ace clumped toward them. 'You did?'

'He's supposed to be linking up with another warlord called Vlad Baptiste. They intend to storm the town of Idleberg.'

Jet Ace was already replacing his helmet. The electronics came back on, and his voice regained its previous heroic quality. 'I must make all speed to Idleberg.' He paused. 'You think I should kill this Vlad Baptiste as well?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded solemnly.

'Definitely.'

'Then I shall slay the pair of them.'

He bent his knees. The rocket cut in, and he rose swiftly into the air. When he was at treetop level, he turned his body to a horizontal position, stretched his arms in front of him, and sped away to the east. The Minstrel Boy, Reave, and Renatta watched him go.

Renatta shaded her eyes against the sun. 'You think he has a sex life?'

Reave laughed. 'I'd sure like to see that.'

The Minstrel Boy was peering into the distance. 'Is it a bird? Is it a plane?'

Reave looked at him blankly. 'Huh?'

Renatta smiled. 'Another arcane cultural reference.'

> *One of the unique aspects of the Damaged World era was the fanciful, almost childlike attitude to technology. Much of this was clearly a reaction to the fearful advances of the Thousand Years War, when the capacity for mechanized destruction outstripped all finite limits. With the coming of the nothings, technical progress completely ceased, and dependence on the Stuff Catalogue became all but total. The use of adapted templates made it possible to tailor hardware and create strange hybrids that fitted with any cultural fantasy. It was far from uncommon to find stasis settlements that had devised social orders that were based on bizarre combinations of very separated periods in history. One such was the famous preserved site at Conderecto, where archaeologists discovered the now-famous artifacts that were such a strange blend of the fourteenth and seventy-second centuries.*
>
> *— Pressdra Vishnana*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Minstrel Boywaved a hand at the glowing sphere that dominated the display on the pseudosurface. 'That's Krystaleit.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure as you can be of anything.'

'So we're going in?'

'That's the general idea.'

Billy leaned back in his berth and folded his arms behind his head. 'It's been a long time since I was in Krystaleit.'

Reave glanced up from cleaning his pistol. 'Are you sure you're not wanted there?'

Billy shook his head. 'I already told you. Not that I know of.'

Reave turned to the Minstrel Boy. 'What about you?'

'Clean, to my knowledge.'

'Renatta?'

'Nobody wants me anywhere.'

Reave grinned. 'I'm sure that's not true.'

Renatta giggled throatily, and the Minstrel Boy cocked an eyebrow. He was starting to wonder if there was something going on between Reave and Renatta. The trip from Santa Freska had been tediously decorous. Renatta had left him strictly alone, but he could not shake the feeling that she and Reave had engaged in some covert coupling while he and Billy had been asleep. He caught Renatta's eye, and she beamed at him with the same flash of promise that there had been when they had first left the Caverns in the gold submarine. He was now totally confused, but he knew that it was no time to have his concentration disturbed by romantic complexities.

'Going into Krystaleit can be a bit weird,' he said. 'It's just so big. Where most stasis settlements are built traditionally, from the ground up, with at least the illusion of land and sky, Krystaleit occupies all of its stabilized space. It's basically a vast sphere hanging in the nothings that's honeycombed with constructions on a dozen or more levels. You come in onto one of these huge ring platforms that circle the main sphere. At times of peak traffic these platforms get real crowded, and accidents do happen.

'Can you handle it?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. 'All I can do is try.

'Do your best there, boy. We don't want no accidents.' The decision to make for Krystaleit had come only after a good deal of discussion. There had been general agreement that the small backcountry settlements were becoming far too strange. The DNA Cowboys wanted no repeats of Santa Freska and no more psychos like

Vlad Baptiste or, at the other extreme, lunatics like Jet Ace. It became a little more difficult when it was time to select one particular city as an ultimate destination. Even the little that Billy remembered about his criminal record seem to exclude him from two-thirds of the major cities in the Damaged World. Finally, Krystaleit had been chosen after Billy had assured the others that he would not be arrested the moment they rolled out of the nothings.

They came out into the middle of a funeral. The Minstrel Boy had to stand on the Saab's brakes, locking the treads, to stop them from plowing into the main procession. Angry heads turned as the Minstrel Boy backed the tank out of the way. The hundred or more mourners were dressed in flowing creations of pure spotless white. Krystaleit was one of the places where white was the accepted color of death. It was considered to be the symbol of completion, of all things made one. The mourners wore elaborate and immensely expensive costumes — high diaphanous headdresses with sweeps of muslin and lace that flowed and floated. Surprisingly, there was a lot of exposure of bare flesh, and a high proportion of the mourners were tall, long-legged, and extremely handsome women. The Minstrel Boy wondered who had died. The corpse, wrapped in a white lace shroud and wearing a gold crown on its head, was sitting upright in a litter, borne on the muscular shoulders of six identical young men in white loincloths and body paint.

As the procession wound its way to the edge of the nothings, the mourners sang a high, wordless chant that steadily grew in intensity. When they finally halted at the very edge of the non-matter, the song had reached the level of coordinated screaming. The Minstrel Boy had expected that after due ceremony, the corpse would be ejected into the nothings and the funeral party would return to the business of the living. Thus, it came as something of a surprise when nothing of the kind happened. The young men carrying the litter simply walked into the nothings without the slightest hesitation. Two by two, they smoked and vanished and became one with the non. There was a sustained sigh as the corpse itself and the last pair of bearers disappeared. Then the voices picked up a theme that was more jaunty and rhythmic, and the procession started back the way it had come. The Minstrel Boy wondered what had been done to the six young men to make them sacrifice themselves in such a seemingly pointless manner. Brainwashed or drugged or in the throes of some metaphysical madness? It was possible that they had been specifically created for nothing more than the funeral — mere products of the stuff receiver — and that nobody looked on their deaths as a loss. He was reminded that human behavior in Krystaleit could be exceedingly perverse at times.

Reave must have also been remembering. 'You have to watch your ass here in the big city. Krystaleit can be a lot of fun, but it can also get deeply weird. You have to be ready for it.'

The Minstrel Boy engaged the Saab's drive and slowly followed in the wake of the returning funeral. The platform, despite its size, was more crowded than the Minstrel Boy ever remembered seeing it before. Hundreds of people and all manner of vehicles came out of the nothings in a constant stream. A high proportion of the incoming travelers looked scared and exhausted, as though they were on the move not for the fun or adventure of it but from force of circumstance.

'What the hell are all these folks? Refugees, or what?' Reave asked.

They were passing a ragged family of four with pinched, depressed faces who appeared to be lugging all their worldly goods with them.

Billy peered through the port. 'Refugees for sure. There have got to be a lot more of these raider warlords causing trouble out there, more than just the two we've happened across.'

'I suppose you could call us refugees. I mean, we're avoiding the raiders just like everyone else.'

'Yeah, but we've got class.'

'Let's hope we've got enough class. All these refugees may make it hard to get into the city.'

The Minstrel Boy grunted. 'Looks like we're going to find out soon enough.'

The nearest way off the platform was through a high hexagonal arch. The funeral party was heading that way, and the Minstrel Boy saw no reason why they should not do the same. The only snag was that the entrance was guarded. It was flanked by two giant figures in ancient suits of powered battle armor that must have dated back to the Thousand Years War. The suits were scarred and battered, with crude welded patches and areas discolored by old, old blast wounds. The MEWs built into their right forearms were more than capable of vaporizing the Saab without leaving a trace. Any weapon with that kind of capability had to date back to before Stuff Central.

The Minstrel Boy frowned.

'This is looking kind of serious,' the Minstrel Boy commented.

The hulking metal troopers only stood and intimidated, watching the shuffling lines through impassive visor slits. The real business of vetting the new arrivals was conducted by a half dozen militia men in drab gray uniforms toting much more modest sidearms. A movable barrier restricted the free flow of vehicles and pedestrians through the arch and into the city itself. As the funeral party approached, the barrier was raised and the people in white were quickly waved

through. Once they were inside, though, the barrier came down again, warning lights flashed, and the laborious process of questioning every arrival resumed. A long line immediately formed, and inside the Saab everyone settled down for a long wait.

'Okay, listen up.' Reave seemed to be falling more and more into the leadership role. Since he did it so well, Billy and the Minstrel Boy were content to let him. 'There are a couple things we all ought to remember about Krystaleit. The most important thing is their credit system. Everything here is based on that.'

Renatta frowned.

'Credit? Why do they need credit when everything comes from Stuff Central?'

'Control. Always someone who wants to control everyone else.'

'So we don't have any credit. What's going to happen to us?'

Billy took up the story. 'In normal times, credit was granted to most new arrivals. You were assessed on the value of your vehicle and whatever you might have brought with you, credited accordingly, and issued with a temporary crys.' He glanced out the port. 'Unfortunately, they seem to have raised the basic qualification level.'

Outside, almost half the people who approached the barrier were being turned away.

'There's one other kicker in the system. Something called the Personal Value Minimum. When they first figure out your credit, you're given what's known as a base number. It's like your real bottom-line value, calculated on your age, skills, physical condition, sexual utility, how smart you are, all that sort of thing. A biode can work that stuff out real fast. The trouble starts if you ever run through that last line of credit and hit the zero. That makes you an indigent, and indigents become property of the city. They literally own your ass.'

'And what can they do with your ass once they own it?'

Billy smiled grimly. 'Anything they like. Anything from impressed servitude to dumping you straight into the nothings without an SG. Of course, they have to catch you first, and there are a lot of places to hide in Krystaleit.'

'You sound like you know this from firsthand experience.'

Billy laughed. 'I came close, but I never quite hit the zero.'

Renatta was not convinced. 'Why the hell did we come here? I don't want to become property of the city.'

'There's drawbacks to every deal. It's a good place to be if you don't screw up. Always something going on.'

The line to the barrier was moving at a snail's pace. The Minstrel Boy remembered the other times he had come into Krystaleit when there had been no lines or barriers or armored men who looked like

the incarnation of sudden death. The first time had been with Old Gridghast. The old man had taken some trouble to explain the city to him:

'You don't come here looking for logic or any real social organization. It's got some of the names that go with social organization, but that's about all. It's much easier to get along in the city if you think about it as one huge organism, and a pretty unhealthy organism at that. Take the credit system. It's a perfect example. On an economic level it's a joke. There's no need for it except that it maintains the Ruling Elite like the organism's atrophied brain.'

The Minstrel Boy remembered how he had protested. 'Surely the Great Biode has to be the city's brain?'

Old Gridghast had laughed. 'More like some alien implant.'

'So what about all the cops and militia that you see every where? Isn't that social organization?'

'I find them much easier to handle if I think about them as the organism's immune system, the antibodies that attempt to protect it against destructive parasites. All you have to do is keep your head down and don't look like a disease.'

The Minstrel Boy decided not to share those particular memories with the others. Old Gridghast would be hard to follow for someone who had not been there.

They were just two cars away from the checkpoint. Reave cautioned them all. 'Here we go. Let the Minstrel Boy do the talking.'

The Minstrel Boy raised his eyebrows. 'Why me?'

'Because you're glib, and you're also in the driver's seat.'

Then they were at the head of the line. The Minstrel Boy eased the Saab up to the barrier and popped the port beside him. The armored troopers had turned to face the tank. They clearly were not taking any chances with such a heavily armored unit. Up close, the battle armor looked as old as the hills. The Minstrel Boy wondered what kind of men were inside the metal suits. The legends claimed that back in the olden days, the armored troopers had been virtual cyborgs, tank-grown semimen who were grafted into their armor for the entirety of their lives. He supposed that if someone was prepared to have the kind of surgery that had created Jet Ace, there surely could be individuals willing to be throwbacks to the war with the Draan.

Back in Litz the Minstrel Boy had watched tapes of that conflict. At the siege of Bergman's Asteroid, wave after wave of those hulking troopers, maybe a hundred thousand in all, had been thrown at the Draan emplacements, but each time they had been driven back by the batteries of huge particle cannons the methane-based invertebrates

had built into the bedrock of the planetoid. The scope of the carnage had been so vast that even as he had watched the ancient images of what looked like some hell for aliens flicker across the screen, he had found it nearly impossible to believe.

The face of a militiaman appeared at the port. He was unshaven and had the look of a man who had been on duty much too long. The standard questions came out like a tired rote.

'What is the purpose of your visit to Krystaleit?'

'We just came to see the big city.'

'You always travel in a fighting vehicle?'

'Things have been getting a little hairy out in the boonies.'

'How many passengers are aboard this vehicle?'

'Four, including myself.'

'We are going to have to examine your vehicle.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'Sure, no problem.'

The militiaman pointed at an area just beyond the barrier, where the road surface was painted with a yellow grid. 'You see that yellow marked section?'

'Right.'

'Pull your vehicle over there and await inspection.'

'Anything you say.'

The barrier was raised, and the Minstrel Boy moved the Saab forward.

Reave crouched beside him. 'You think this means trouble?'

'I don't know. It could just be a routine check. Not everyone turns up in a fully armed battlewagon.'

'I hope you're right.'

The Minstrel Boy maneuvered the Saab onto the yellow grid and shut down the drive. One of the armored troopers had crunched along behind them and stood covering them with his MEW.

The militiaman reappeared at the port. 'Will you all please step down from your vehicle?'

At a slight nod from Reave the Minstrel Boy opened the hatch. As they clambered out, they found that in addition to the armored trooper who was covering the Saab, there were also a half dozen militiamen pointing their sidearms at them.

'You will now please follow the flashing red line to the door indicated. Once inside, you will surrender all weapons you may be carrying to the desk officer and await questioning.'

At their feet there was a set of color-coded guide brights setin the floor. They followed the red flashing strip as instructed and were in turn followed by the militiaman and his squad. The designated door led to a nondescript room with all the worn grime that inevitably accompanies the downside of authority. The gray steel walls were

plastered with routinely ugly warning notices printed in the dour Gothic script that was used exclusively by officialdom in the city. The desk officer sat behind a transparent plasteel shield. There was a small heat cannon close to his right hand, its purpose clearly to ensure full and fast cooperation in the surrender of weapons. With great reluctance the DNA Cowboys passed their guns through a security slit in the plasteel. When that was done, the desk officer glanced down at a mass/density scanner. He did not look pleased.

'The one in black has a needler concealed in his sleeve.'

Two militiamen moved in on Billy and relieved him of it. He made a helpless gesture.

'I swear to God, I clean forgot it was there.'

The one who had originally presented himself at the port looked wearily reproachful. 'This isn't a good start.'

'I'm telling you, I'd forgotten I had it.'

A tall man in a purple robe trimmed with black fur walked into the room. The militiamen came to halfhearted attention, and the desk officer acknowledged him with a limp salute. The Minstrel Boy did not know what rank of title went with the robe, but it was clear that he was from the middle levels of the civil bureaucracy.

'Are these the ones from the tank?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Let's have the Datron take a look at them before we go any further.'

The four of them were moved to a smaller, dimly blue-lit chamber that was almost completely filled with a tangle of very old hardware. Plasma conduits and thick ropes of power cables hung in dangling festoons; the pulsing and crackling vacuum columns that were the source of blue light took up an entire wall. They looked as if they were as old as time. Only the biomass, in its soft, shapeless dermal, looked as though it might have been made by contemporary technology. And in the center of it all was the tiny human in the saline tank — the Datron itself. It looked like a huge child, with an oversized, deformed head and sad, pale saucer eyes. Much of its body was obscured bythe mass of contacts that were grafted to it. Just one arm was free of leads and webbing. The hand was raised, and the stunted baby fingers fluttered ceaselessly in what seemed to be an unconscious spasm. The Minstrel Boy shuddered. He did not want to think about what went on in that mind. By normal standards, the Datron had to be insane, although normal standards hardly applied. It was a living cognizant, jacked into nearly infinite banks of data. In that, the Datron was as much a throwback as were the armored troopers outside. Both had their origins in the long-dead age when the giant starships had gone out to do battle with the Draan, except in

those days the Datron would have found its way between galaxies and dimensions, whereas now it merely maintained the personal records of the city's population. Old Gridghast, in his introduction to Krystaleit, had told the Minstrel Boy how most of the equipment that he was now facing had actually, long ago, even before the founding of the city, been cannibalized from the navigation systems of one of the last two surviving starships. Krystaleit was famous for its continuing, if greatly scaled down, use of ancient artifacts. But the Datron in particular seemed an absurd corruption of its original grandeur.

The bureaucrat spoke directly to the Datron. 'Please scan these people.'

The Datron blinked and regarded each of the three in turn. Its eyes seemed to water continuously. In a fraction of a second it had analyzed the form and contour of their faces and located the corresponding records. Where once it had been one with the stars, it was now nothing more than a vast collection of mug shots. The Minstrel Boy wondered if the being was aware of how mightily it had fallen.

The Datron's voice was a piping castrate. 'The three males are known to me. From left to right they are Billy Oblivion, Reave Mekonta, and the one who is simply called the Minstrel Boy. All three have extensive criminal records, although no charges have ever been brought against them in this jurisdiction. Collectively they have been called the DNA Cowboys, and inflated stories still circulate about their alleged exploits. I have no data regarding the female.'

The Datron blinked again. The bureaucrat inspected the four of them himself.

'So you're the famous DNA Cowboys. You don't look like much to me.'

Nobody took up the challenge. They were all well aware of the precariousness of their position.

The bureaucrat paced in front of them. 'So what are you doing now? Taking the pay of one of the warlords? We have methods of dealing with hostile infiltrators.'

The Minstrel Boy was genuinely outraged. 'What are you talking about? We're not hired on with anyone.'

'You deny that you're all in the pay of Protexus, or maybe Taraquin and Baptiste?'

'Taraquin and Baptiste are the reason that we're here.'

'So you admit it?'

The Minstrel Boy was becoming aware that the bureaucrat was dogged but not terribly bright. He did not know what to think about the Datron. If it knew that Reave had ridden with Baptiste, it was not volunteering the information. Perhaps it only answered direct

questions, like some cybernetic oracle.

'No, we don't admit it. What I'm saying is that we're here because the raids on the stasis towns have made life out then intolerable.'

The bureaucrat's mouth twisted into a sneer. 'Are you telling me that the notorious DNA Cowboys are refugees?'

The Minstrel Boy regarded him coldly. If they were going to have to put up with so much nonsense about the 'notorious DNA Cowboys,' they might as well make use of it. He drew himself up to his full height, assumed the expression of a big time desperado, and started to enunciate very carefully.

'Of course we're not refugees. We're moving on, and we decided that we'd pass through Krystaleit. We like it in Krystaleit. We have friends here. We've always kept our noses clean and we're far from indigent, so are you going to let us pass, or do we have to move on and find a place that may not be quite so celebrated but does know how to extend its hospitality to travelers?'

As he stared at the bureaucrat, the man started to wilt just a little. Perhaps it had occurred to him that if these guys were carrying such a heavyweight reputation around with them, they might just have done one or two things to deserve it. He was not, however, about to cave in completely.

'I have to be assured that you are not fifth columnists working for some warlord. There are all kinds of potential hostiles streaming into the city, and it's my job to keep down those numbers. God knows that it's difficult enough in normal times, what with Nulites blowing things up and these fools discorporating all over the place. In a situation like this it becomes impossible. These damn raiders are becoming organized, and if they attack us with half an army already inside the city, we'd be hard pressed to defend ourselves.'

The bureaucrat was almost defending himself. The Minstrel Boy sensed that they had him on the ropes. Reave came in with his own argument.

'Perhaps we could do a deal that would set your mind at rest.'

'A deal?'

Reave laughed. 'Sure, a deal. Why not? Isn't this Krystaleit? Aren't you guys the masters of deal cutting?'

What Reave had said was perfectly true. The people of Krystaleit prided themselves on their powers of negotiation. The bureaucrat appeared to be no exception. He stroked his chin. 'What kind of deal did you have in mind?'

'Suppose you structured something like this. We agree, say, under penalty of personal foreclosure, that in the event of an attack by any combination of warlords, we will enlist as irregulars in the defense of the city. In return for this, we'd be credited as a triad of master

warriors and given free access.'

The bureaucrat thought about the proposal. 'What you're saying is that the city should buy your loyalty.'

'Not buy it, only take out a credit future on our skills. The problem only arises if there's an attack. Seems to me that you could use a few of the likes of us around.'

'It's still a matter of us trusting you.'

Reave started to get a little impatient. 'Look, the worst that you've accused us of is being mercenaries, and if we do this deal, you'd have a contractual lien on us. We'd be fools to renege on that.'

The bureaucrat looked at the Datron. 'Please evaluate.'

The Datron blinked twice. Its eyes still streamed with tears. 'The logic of the transaction is sound.'

'Would you codify it for us, please?'

'Gladly.'

The sorting out of the details took close to an hour. The Datron spelled out the specifics, and Reave, the Minstrel Boy, and the bureaucrat argued about them. Apart from the numbers, the only real sticking point was the insistence by the bureaucrat and the Datron that the Saab be impounded by the city for the DNA Cowboys' stay. Reave finally had to give in.

The bureaucrat looked to the Datron for the final figures. 'Please give their agreed credit levels.'

'The triad known as the DNA Cowboys have a level 0-34789-0. The woman calling herself Renatta de Luxe has a level of 0-211-0.'

The Krystaleit numerical system was a little strange.

The bureaucrat handed them their crys. They were microthin crystal disks in ceramic cases that carried the constantly updated record of their owners' financial status. They could be used in the transaction units throughout the city and totally superseded money. The DNA Cowboys reclaimed their weapons and then headed out for the interior of the city. Reave and the Minstrel Boy were jubilant.

'I think we actually stuck it to them.'

'It's a great credit base.'

'Pity about the battlewagon, though.'

'That couldn't be helped.'

Billy was a lot less happy. 'We also enlisted in their goddamn army. Is that sticking it to them?'

The Minstrel Boy dismissed his complaints with a wave. 'Only if the city's attacked. Do you really see even a bunch of warlords trying to tackle a place this size?'

Reave grinned. 'If they do, we can always desert. We've done that before.'

The Minstrel Boy looked around at Billy. 'Besides, you almost

stuck us with that trick with the needler. Did you think they wouldn't have an m/d scanner?'

Billy glared and said nothing.

Renatta also had a beef. 'How come my credit is so much smaller than yours?'

'You're an unknown quantity with no declared skills. You've only been given a minimum flesh value.'

'Oh, great. That's wonderful. I'm minimum flesh.'

The Minstrel Boy put an arm around her. 'Don't worry about it. We'll push you some credit across so you don't hit the zero.'

'What am I, a charity case?'

The bickering stopped immediately as they came out of the access tube and had their first look at the heart of the city. Even Billy could not help but be awed by its shining grandeur.

'Just look at those lights.'

It was almost as though the city had been created from light and the levels of the physical structure were only a subordinate afterthought. Night and day were history, replaced by a ballet of massed luminance. There appeared to be a million of them, and optical tricks made it seem as if they went on to black infinity. Some pulsed, others shone steadily, and more danced in a complexity of designs. Projected images appeared on the facets of glittering diamonds. There was free leaping static, and an enclosed, cold fury of tall plasma towers soared through dozens of levels. To the Minstrel Boy, the splendor of Krystaleit was an energy net that he could easily imagine having some purpose of its own, way beyond just the visual gratification of mere mortals. Indeed, that could even have been the truth. At a number of points throughout the city, there were big and incredibly ancient power devices. Although their true function was lost in the mist of time, they still ran and were maintained solely for the silent sheets of contorted radiance that leaked from their interiors and cascaded through the spaces between levels. Many of them must have contained their own intelligences, unimaginable, deathless entities that passed the centuries contemplating chill abstractions and keeping vigil for god masters who had been slaughtered in the voids between distant stars.

To the newcomer, the most alien thing about Krystaleit was the way it so absolutely occupied three-dimensional space. Genetic memory balked at its sheer drops and the yawning chasms between structures. Even the old hands had to remind their ingrained fear of falling that gravity spirals in the open spaces would slide them to a safe, if bone-jarring, landing. Billy Oblivion pointed up the feeling by leaning over the unrailed side of the platform on which the four of them were standing and peering down at the apparently endless drop.

'I swear this place was built for birds.'

'Do you ever stop complaining?'

'I'll get around to it one day.'

Krystaleit offered a variety of methods for transporting humans and their goods from one level to the next. The crudest was the blowtube, which could shoot an individual or containerthrough many levels in a matter of seconds. The filament escalators and the more substantial peoplemovers, which angled between the buildings and platforms, offered a more sedate ride. The daring strapped on tiny dorsal rockets, miniature versions of Jet Ace's big thruster, while the wealthy owned their own flying cars, anything from a four- to twenty-eight-seater. By far the most comfortable means, open to everyone, was the float egg. The float egg was exactly what it sounded like, a large ceramic egg, three feet long, housing an elementary biode and a small koja engine that was hooked into the city's magnetic field. It was mounted with a saddle and handgrips. There were thousands of them throughout the city, and they operated on a simple but neatly effective system. When a person found one that was not in use, it was free for the taking. When it was no longer needed, it was left for the next user. There was a natural tendency for them to concentrate in the outer areas of the city, but a built-in homing instinct brought them back to the busy central areas if they remained idle for an extended period. At first Renatta and the three men were content to stroll. They stepped onto the wide surface strip of a peoplemover that spiraled upwards between two monolithic blocktowers. Like tourists, they were happy to stand and gape while regular citizens, inured to the spectacle all around them, hurried past, going about their business. The Minstrel Boy took a deep breath of air that was heavy with a cocktail of multiple scents. It was good to be in a place that was so big and cosmopolitan and sophisticated. He noticed Renatta studying the passersby. Her face showed a childlike delight. He suspected that she had been looking for a place like Krystaleit all her life. In the crowds around them there was an almost limitless variety of the styles and cultures of the Damaged World. On the peoplemover alone there were neoprimitives with gaudy peacock hair and spirit poles, flexing and strutting to the polyrhythrns coming from their sinujacks. At the other extreme a covey of stooped brain dwellers, with their stunted bodies and enlarged, hyperencephalic heads, were lost in the private tranceland of theii dreamhelms. Even with the help of insectoid servoskeletons, they moved at a painful snail's pace. A pair of perfectoz, a man and a woman, stepped around them with looks of bleak contempt. The couple had immaculately maintained bodies that were naked apart from rainbow body lube and implanted powerjewelry. The Minstrel Boy noted Reriatta's look of delight when

a large gang of children came racing down the moving strip, whooping and yelling and dodging in and out among the adults. He did not want to be the one to tell her that quite likely at least half of them were arrestives who had probably been taking munchkin treatments since before she was born.

There was also a darker side to Krystaleit. The practical results of the city's economy that legitimized the seizure and ownership of people were all around them. A grossly fat, turbaned and robed slaver waddled down the strip in front of his own personal baggage train, a string of identical red-haired teens yoked at the neck, joined by lengths of chain, and guarded by burly minders. Two city epsilons with mindlocks clamped across their shaved heads loaded garbage bubbles onto a floatflat. Farther up the spiral, a diminutive lowlife in dark glasses and a flowershirt was trying to recruit a buyer for a glazed-out young woman who might have been his sister.

The four really displayed their tourist status when the bomb went off. It was only a small bomb as urban bombs went, and it probably did only minimal damage. It was also two levels away, but Renatta and the three men all ducked. To their embarrassment, no one else did. The citizens around them hardly gave a second glance to the column of smoke that billowed up. They just went on with whatever they were doing.

'What in hell was that?'

Reave watched the smoke cloud slowly dissipate. 'Probably Nulites at their devotions.'

A woman in high boots and a plastic bodyhug nodded as she walked by. 'Sure, mister, that was Nulites. Something ought to be done about those bastards. They're a menace.'

The explosion shocked them out of the holiday mood and tipped them into an examination of their situation.

'We really ought to get ourselves a place to stay.'

The Minstrel Boy opted for a touch of class.

'So, we've got credit. Let's stay at some decent place. Heaven knows, we could all use a little luxury.'

Nobody put up an argument. It was decided that they should head for one of the city's better hotels, the Leader, on the Krystalcolumn.

'I doubt we want to be taking the walks all that way.'

'We can take float eggs,' Billy said. 'There's a half dozen vacant on a rack just up the way.'

Sure enough, six float eggs rested on a plasticformed rack. The three men moved toward them as though it were the most natural thing in the world, but Renatta hesitated nervously.

'I don't know how to ride one of those things. I'm not even sure that I want to.'

Billy laughed. 'Don't worry about it — it's real easy.' Billy had become a good deal more cheerful since they had entered the city. It was beginning to look as though he was going to make a full recovery.

The Minstrel Boy started to explain. 'All you have to do in sit on it.'

Renatta gave him a withering look. 'Why don't you sit on it?'

'No, seriously. The egg is equipped with a single-function biode. All you have to do is sit on the saddle and grab the handgrips and think about where you want to go. The biode does the rest. The egg will take you there. It's as simple as that. The biode can read you through your contact with the saddle and your palms on the grip. The only thing you have to worry about is a single twist grip that regulates the speed.'

Renatta pulled a face. 'It can read you through your clothes?'

'Sure. You don't have to have actual flesh contact.'

'I've heard the phrase flying by the seat of your pants, but this is ridiculous. I'm not sure I want a biode looking up my ass. Can't we rent a car or something?'

'Cars are at a premium here. And anyway, you don't have to worry about the biode. All it knows is how to find its way around.'

Reave and Billy were already easing a pair of eggs out of their mounts.

'Come on and try it. You'll like it when you get used to it.'

The Minstrel Boy turned and started walking toward the other two. Renatta reluctantly followed. He humped an egg out of its stand and swung his leg over it. He took hold of the handgrips and the machine slowly rose until it was about nine inches from the ground. Renatta gingerly did the same.

Reave gestured to her. 'Fasten the straps across your thighs.'

Slowly at first but rapidly gathering speed, the four eggs lifted from the platform and swung out into empty air. Billy took to flying like a duck to water. Opening the grip to maximum speed, he ran wide, fast circles around the others. And despite herself, Renatta actually started to enjoy the experience.

Although the Leader Hotel was not the best in Krystaleit, it was definitely up there. As the DNA Cowboys walked through the mirror dome of the foyer, all three were reminded of just how good things could be in the big cities. The four rooms took up even more of their credit than they had expected, but they decided it was still worth it. It was a crash course in civilization that was more than welcome after their wandering in the extremities. The only thing that slightly marred the Minstrel Boy's pleasure was the fact that Renatta insisted on a room of her own. He could only assume that it was a signal. Their affair, if it still existed at all, had become decidedly nonexclusive.

The rooms were as lavish as the foyer. The Minstrel Boy's was up on the twelfth circle and was decorated in the manner of the Dyrian Empire with murals modeled after the classic Estarzo Temple paintings. The fittings were gilt, and the furniture was reproduction Jason XIII blueglass. The only unfortunate touch was that the body-fitted cleanse-and-massage machine looked too much like an ornate instrument of torture. As he broke down the foldaway and stashed his belongings, he realized that for the first time in almost as long as he could remember, he was alone with time to think. He lay back on the bed and stared up at the reflective ceiling. At least here he was beyond the reach of any fanatical would-be murderer. He could finally relax. There was, however, a nagging question.

'So what the hell do I do next?'

The ceiling replied with a soft feminine voice. 'I am not capable of advising you, sir, but the Leader Hotel does have a very efficient soothsay circuit on the seventeenth circle.'

The Minstrel Boy jumped out of his skin. After he had finished twitching, he snapped angrily at his own reflection. 'I didn't know you were on. Please deactivate.'

The voice of the room sounded a little miffed. 'I'm sorry I took you by surprise. I will deactivate now. If you need me, call me.'

He flopped back onto the bed. He still was not sure how he felt about the strange reunion of the DNA Cowboys. Reave he could take, but he was not too comfortable about Billy. Although Billy was more like his old self than he had been whenhe had staggered into the Voice in the Wilderness, there still seemed to be bits of him missing. It was as if the Masters of the Sanctuary had burned out a good portion of his brain. If it had not been for the smooth pro way he had gone into the cantina in Santa Freska Town, the Minstrel Boy would have assumed that much of the old Billy was gone for good. And then there was the matter of Renatta. She was still tagging along with them, but he was far from clear about what she wanted. Although she was worldly-wise in many respects, she seemed painfull inexperienced in the necessities of adventuring. Her reaction to the float egg had been silly in the extreme and unworthy of anyone who wanted to be an adventuress. It had definitely lowered her in his esteem.

The final and most perplexing problem was the course that the new incarnation of the DNA Cowboys was going to take. The world had certainly become too grim and serious to support their old fantasy ways. Even though he did not voice it to the others anymore, he was still haunted by the idea that there were somehow remote powers controlling their destinies. He sat up with a sigh. If he had learned anything in his travels, it was that the future stubbornly refused to reveal itself and that brooding about what was going to be only made

him depressed. The unfortunate part was that dreaming about it also made him depressed.

The veetar was on the bed beside him. He stretched out a hand to open the case but stopped halfway. It was pointless. But to his surprise he found that his hand was still working on the snaps. He swung his feet onto the floor and carefully lifted out the gleaming handmade instrument. He positioned it on his knee. His fingers flexed, and shimmering notes flowed from it. He ran slowly through the introduction to "Speeding through Nowhere," then lowered his head slightly. If it had been a public performance, the mannerism would have indicated to an audience that he was going to sing. He stopped abruptly with an impatient discordant clang. He still had nothing to say. He put the instrument back into the case and shut the lid, then rolled back onto the bed and closed his eyes. Within seconds he was fast asleep.

Speeding through nowhere
At the velocity of dreams
Bowed by memories of shame
But streamlined
By the fear that follows
I'd look around if I could
But I'm afraid that I'd lose my grip
I know that you're back there
And that only makes it twice as hard
Do we go on to infinity?
To the points where all things meet?
In infinity, will we be together,
Or does infinity just mean never?
(In infinity do we break down and show ourselves?)
Speeding through nowhere
At the velocity of dreams.
A fragment of "Speeding through Nowhere"
by the Minstrel Boy

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER EIGHT

'I think we'll be going up to our. . rooms.'

Billy and Renatta had their arms around each other, but at least they had the decency to look a little sheepish. The Minstrel Boy glanced at Reave. It was a whole new development that appeared to have come into being while he was asleep. Reave gave the slightest of shrugs, as though he was also at a loss to explain the new blossoming of romance.

By the time the Minstrel Boy had finally come down to the Grand Lounge of the Leader Hotel, the others had already been there for some time, and the entwining of Billy and Renatta was well under way. The Minstrel Boy had not said anything, although he was aware that he must have looked a little surprised when he had first walked in. He had settled himself on one of the low reclining couches and let the gold-clad serving women pamper him. He had at one point, however, caught Renatta's glance and she had responded to his slightly raised eyebrow with a look of defiance.

The Minstrel Boy raised a hand in a confused gesture. 'Uh. . yeah. Good night.'

He sipped his drink and watched them walk away. Renatta was certainly turning out to be something else. 'So how did that get started?'

Reave spread his hands. 'I really wasn't paying attention. I was too busy drinking and looking at the waitresses.'

'Come on.'

'Does it bother you?'

The Minstrel Boy thought fora moment. 'I'm not sure.'

'If you're not sure, you ain't hurting.'

'I was curious how it came about.'

'How do these things ever come about? First of all they weredrinking together, and then they were whispering together, and finally they were pawing at each other like they couldn't wait to be off on their own.' Reave's eyes twinkled. 'It did seem that they waited for you to show up before they left.'

'That was nice of them.'

Reave peered at the Minstrel Boy with narrowed eyes. 'You don't like this, do you?'

The Minstrel Boy grimaced. 'It ain't that I don't like it. It's just that it's. .'

Reave filled in for him. 'It's just that it's Billy.'

'Damn right it's Billy. I don't know what to make of him anymore. He's like a zombie half the time. I didn't even know he was interested

in women anymore. We've got to do something about him before he gets to be a menace.'

'What do you suggest we do with him? Drum him out of the regiment?'

The Minstrel Boy knew that the conversation was going to be pointless. Whatever they said, they were stuck with Billy. 'I don't know.'

Reave pursed his lips. 'You've always considered yourself superior to Billy, haven't you?'

The Minstrel Boy blinked. 'Haven't *you*? He's a cyclatrol fuck. He isn't called Billy Oblivion for nothing.'

Reave stroked his chin. 'I'm not sure that partners should feel superior to each other.'

'I'm not sure that partners should put the make on your girl.'

'Maybe she just wanted to screw all three of us.'

There was a long silence while the Minstrel Boy stared at Reave. Finally he sighed. 'In the tank?'

Reave nodded. There was another silence.

Suddenly the Minstrel Boy laughed. 'Well, if you're right — and it looks like you are — it's one hell of an ambition.'

Reave finished his drink and set down the glass. 'The fact does remain that she's gone with Billy and we're the cast-off rejects. And what's more, we don't seem to be exactly cutting a swath in this place.'

The Minstrel Boy raised his head and looked around. 'Are you suggesting that we do our drinking somewhere where they might appreciate us a little more?'

'That's exactly what I'm suggesting.'

The Minstrel Boy studied the Grand Lounge of the Leader Hotel. It was reputed to be an accurate reconstruction of the ballroom of the starcruiser *Bel Air,* the civilian luxury transport that had been vaporized by the Draan back at the very start of the war. It was a vision of white and gold magnificence, but it was decidedly sedate. Although the people all around them looked handsome and chic, a lot of the faces betrayed the unique tension that came only with centuries of longlife and youth treatments. A muted n'yesh quartet was playing slow and formal dance music on the other side of the room, and a number of couples were dancing with a notable absence of passion or enthusiasm. The only genuinely youthful energy was possessed by the clutch of very young women who were there in the company of much older men.

The Minstrel Boy nodded and swung his legs off the couch. 'Yeah, we don't belong here. This is an exhibition of embalming. A bunch of credit doesn't turn a rowdy into a patrician.'

'So why don't us old rowdies go out over to Bluecat Plaza where

we belong?'

The Minstrel Boy stood up. 'Why the hell don't we?'

As they were walking out, Reave grinned at the Minstrel Boy. 'Tell me something.'

'What?'

'You think you're superior to me?'

The Minstrel Boy smiled slyly. 'Hell, I always treated you equal.'

Bluecat Plaza, just below the main core of Krystaleit, was the undisputed epicenter of the city's underworld, a haven for the uncouth, the unorthodox, and the just plain criminal. The plaza itself was an open space at the convergence of a maze of twisting lanes and alleys that wound in and out between the downward sweep of the massive power conduits running out of the core. It was named for the Bluecat Artifact, one of the mysterious remnants of the long-gone age of advanced technology. The artifact was a dark metal monolith, some forty feet high with a pair of equilateral cones projecting from the top. The cones, plus me two large, side-by-side ovoid ports like great slit eyes radiating an even, pale blue luminescence, gave the thing a resemblance to a giant stylized feline. It was not the most magnificent of the artifacts, but it was sufficiently dramatic to presideover Krystaleit's delinquent heart like the enigmatic idol of some forgotten technocat god.

Reave and the Minstrel Boy approached the less than savory section of the inner city by the steep peoplemover that ran around the outer armor that shielded the city's central biode and the primary stasis generator. They could see the blue glow of the cat's eyes while they were still two levels up. When they stepped off the moving belt, the bare, bright plaza was comparatively deserted. That did not surprise them — the majority of that area's denizens preferred the dark, enclosed labyrinth of the alleys. The main human presence was the men and women, boys and girls, who displayed themselves from the shadows at the periphery. A strange tradition had grown up among the prostitutes of the Bluecat: There were tall, shallow, depressed flutes around the energy stacks where they passed through the floor of the plaza level. Those who wished to ply their trade positioned themselves one per flute and made their pitch from there. The come-on was contained in a single word.

'Me!'

'Meeee. . meeee. .'

'Choose me.'

'See me, feel me.'

'Me.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy crossed the plaza with the sound

sighing around them like a human breeze. One of the strange unwritten rules of the plaza was that the whores must not leave the flutes unless hired by a client. An authoritarian voice snapped through the general whisper.

'You! You there! You will come over to me!'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy did not falter. They were not in the mood for transactional love games.

Their goal for the moment was to become drunk, noisy, and aggressive, in general to act like the heros they were supposed to be. They walked straight toward the mouth of Mildweedallee, the arterial lane that led into the nameless delights of the Bluecat proper.

Where the plaza was blue, the surrounding labyrinth was a deep carnal red. Scarlet banners floated on the air, and a cacophony of music and voices spilled out from the doorways of a hundred nightclubs and gin mills, houses of ill repute and less that announced their names in everything from mist optics to electricglobes. The Balrog, the Club Adolf, the King Snake, the Casa Celine, the Hive, and the Red and Black all vied for the pair's attention and credit. They passed the dark doorway of a Nulite mosque sealed with the symbol of the Explosion of the Primal Birth. The Minstrel Boy halted in front of the display glass of a retailer with a modest sign that read 'Churchill's Weapons.'

'Will you look at that?'

In the center of the window was a set of flat chromium throwing knives, individually sheathed in a black leather apron belt with silver fittings. The Minstrel Boy was transfixed.

'I want them.'

Reave nodded. The knives looked impressive. 'I was wondering what happened to your old set.'

'It's going to stretch the credit if I buy them.'

'So buy them. We'll only piss it away if you don't. Weapons are weapons.'

The Minstrel Boy went inside. Reave chuckled to himself. 'The DNA Cowboys go shopping.'

After a number of minutes bargaining, the Minstrel Boy came out of the store strapping on the knives and looking exceedingly pleased with himself. He and Reave walked on. A busker was playing a droned wanglejangle so excruciatingly badly that the Minstrel Boy, as a music lover, had an urge to go over and kick him. A wino sat in a doorway, delivering a monologue to a gray discorporate who sagged beside him. When they reached the point where the Mildweedallee crossed Creed Passage, they heard a very different kind of music: the high, spine-chilling harmonies of a chromacon that was being played by a master. The Minstrel Boy stopped again.

'I swear to God. .'

Reave was immediately alert. 'What is it?'

The Minstrel Boy listened intently. 'I know that tone.'

Reave relaxed. 'You know who's playing?'

'I think I've got a very good idea.' He cast around, trying to figure out which place was the source of the sound. 'I think it's coming from the Victory Cafe.'

Reave grinned. 'So let's go.'

The Minstrel Boy hesitated before following him. There had been a time when he had drawn crowds at the Victory Cafe, and now he did not even play. He was not sure that he wanted tosee what was going on in there. But in the instant of the thought, he knew that he was being neurotic. 'Aah. . what the hell.' The Victory Cafe was packed, and they had to forcibly push their way through to the bar. For the Bluecat district, the place was uncharacteristically well lit. It was a utilitarian barn with cheap drinks, rubyjewel dispensers along the wall, and dull stainless-steel surfaces that no doubt could be hosed down after a particularly wild night. The focal point was the stage that took up one end of the big room. It was fitted with plastic screens that protected the performers from flying mugs and pitchers, although these particular musicians did not sound as though they could ever move the crowd to the kind of fury that might end with flying missiles. They had the mass of people who romped and stomped in front of the stage eating out of their hands.

Broken statue, now you are pieces
You can no longer speak
You have fallen from your pedestal
You could have been a genuine antique.

The singer's hands danced over the pressure angles of a midnight blue Maxim chromacon, while a percussionist and taira player sweated behind him. Limp blond hair hung over his face, the top half of which was hidden by a huge pair of faceted insectspecs. A large diamond flashed on the pinkie of his left hand.

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'Clay Blaisdell. I never thought I'd see him again.'

Reave nodded in time to the music. 'He's real good.'

'He's the man when it comes to the chromacon.'

'Is he better than you?'

The Minstrel Boy avoided Reave's glance. 'I don't play anymore, so the question doesn't really come up.'

The Minstrel Boy clearly wanted to drop the subject, but Reave was not about to let it go. There was a wicked glint in his eye. 'So

were you better than him when you did play?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. 'I don't know, it was close. Playing music isn't exactly like being the fastest gun alive, you know.'

They had maneuvered their way through the crowd in front of the bar and were standing there, clutching beakers of therough local joona. The Minstrel Boy was looking at the ruby-jewel dispensers, wondering if a handful of beads might help the evening along. The piece that the trio was playing came to a ringing finish. The mob around the stage went crazy, stamping and hollering. Blaisdell took a bow and then raised his hands in smiling acknowledgment.

'Thank you. Thank you all. We love you, but me and the boys are going to take a little break right now. Don't go away now, though. We'll be back in a half hour.'

The Minstrel Boy took a long hit on his drink. 'He may be an angel on the chromacon, but he's got a lousy line in fake sincerity.'

There were shouts of protest from the crowd, but the band picked up their instruments and left the stage. Clay Blaisdell, with the Maxim under his arm, pushed his way determinedly toward the bar, surrounded by a knot of backslapping admirers. The bartender already had a drink set up for him. Just as he was reaching for it, he spotted the Minstrel Boy.

'Mother of God!'

The Minstrel Boy raised a hand. 'How are you doing, Clay?'

'What hole did you crawl out of?'

'I've been a lot of places since I saw you last.'

They were face to face. Clay Blaisdell drained his beaker and wiped his mouth.

'So what are you doing here?'

'Just passing through.'

There was a definite tension between the two men. It was hardly the reunion of old friends, much more a chance meeting between onetime rivals.

'These are strange times,' Blaisdell said.

'You're right about that.'

Blaisdell got himself a second drink. 'Is it true what I've been hearing?'

'It depends on what you've been hearing.'

'That the three of you are back together again.'

The Minstrel Boy made a deprecating gesture. 'A chance meeting. We decided to travel together. Old times and all.'

'So where's Billy?'

'Back at the Leader with a woman.'

Blaisdell looked surprised. 'The Leader? You're traveling in style.'

'We thought a little comfort might make a change.'

Blaisdell pushed his hair back out of his eyes. 'Got to be strange times if the DNA Cowboys are staying at the Leader Hotel.'

One of Blaisdell's admirers spit on the floor. 'DNA Cowboys? They're history. Fucking dinosaurs.'

Reave took one step forward. The admirer noticed him for the first time and choked on his drink.

Reave's smile hinted at murder. 'You want to watch who you're calling a dinosaur, laddybuck.'

Still coughing, the admirer backed away, and when Reave did not press the point, he melted into the crowd. Blaisdell, who had watched the exchange with amusement, turned back to the Minstrel Boy.

'So, are you going to get up and do a tune with us?'

The Minstrel Boy quickly shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'Why in hell not? Think you're too good for this joint?'

Again the Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'You know it's not that.'

Blaisdell grinned. 'Maybe you think that we're too good for you?'

The Minstrel Boy sighed. 'I've been traveling a lot. I haven't been playing too much.'

'Then it's a great time to start up again.'

'No.'

Blaisdell looked at him in blank astonishment. 'Are you seriously telling me that you've hung it up?'

'I'm just not playing at the moment.'

There was an awkward pause that Blaisdell did his best to cover. 'Let me buy you a drink. You'll surely say yes to that?'

'I always say yes to a free drink.'

Blaisdell handed the Minstrel Boy a freshly filled beaker. 'You hear what happened to old Abu Christmas?'

The Minstrel Boy made an effort to look interested. 'No, I never did.'

While the Minstrel Boy and Clay Blaisdell were talking, Reave thought he saw someone he recognized — and preferred to avoid — on the other side of the room. He muttered an excuse to the Minstrel Boy and slid through the crowd to take a better look. Carefully, he eased closer to his quarry. It was no mistake. Although the man was not wearing the helmet with the blade weldedto the top, it was Menlo Welker beyond a doubt, the swordsman who had ridden beside him in Baptiste's army. What the hell was he doing there? He seemed to be in the company of two other individuals whom Reave did not know, but their hard eyes and visible scars marked them as warriors cut from the same cloth. Menlo started to turn, and Reave ducked back behind a pillar. As he watched, his ex-comrade pushed through the crowd, apparently headed for the bathrooms downstairs. Reave followed as closely as he could, hoping that his man would not look back. Menlo

was rolling as if he had a load on. The stone stairwell was like a cave — the light was dim, the air was heavy with the stench of urine, and the walls were covered with boldly obscene graffiti.

Menlo went into a stall but did not bother to close the half door behind him. He seemed to be having trouble unfastening his pants. Reave pushed in behind him and pulled the door shut. Before his old companion could react, Reave had his left forearm across Menlo's throat. From his back pocket his right hand drew the lightslicer he had taken from the dead urthugee back at the Voice in the Wilderness. He pulled back Menlo's head, and the weapon flared into glowing green life.

'I'm going to give you exactly one minute to think up a good reason why I shouldn't carve your head off.'

Menlo stood very still, and when he spoke, his voice sounded suddenly sober. 'What is this? What do you want?'

'Don't you recognize me, Menlo?'

Reave allowed him to swivel his head around slightly. Menlo Welker let out a gasp,

'Reave? Reave Mekonta? Is that really you? What is this? We were buddies, goddamn it. I never did you any harm. Don't tell me you've sunk to robbing people while they piss.'

'I'm a deserter, Menlo. I deserted from Baptiste, and I want to know how you feel about that.'

'Hell, Reave, I don't care. It's no skin off my back. I've thought about it myself more than once. Things have changed some since you took off.'

'So you wouldn't think of turning me in to Baptiste for a reward or anything?'

The ribbon of light was so close to Menlo's throat that it cast strange green shadows across his face. He swallowed hard.

'You ought to know me better than that. Besides, I couldn't tell Baptiste about you if I wanted to.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm not going to see him until he arrives here with the whole army.'

'He's headed this way?'

'Damn right he is. Now, are you going to take this thing away from my throat?'

Reave removed his arm from Menlo's neck. He lowered the lightslicer but let it go on burning. The two men faced each other. Menlo was breathing deeply.

'You're fucking crazy, Reave Mekonta. You know I wouldn't turn you in.'

'I'm sorry, but a man can't be too careful where Baptiste is

concerned. I've seen the way he can get weird with recaptured deserters. For all I knew, he sent you after me. That may sound paranoid, but stranger things have been happening.'

Menlo nodded vigorously. 'You should have stuck with us. You'd believe anything by now. I got to tell you, sometimes I truly believe that the world is coming to an end. You know there are seven thousand of us now. Seven thousand mounted or mechanized guns, plus God knows how many moon-baying neoprimitives with bones in their hair. We had to give them a separate camp where they can cook dogs and do all the other grustuff they get up to.'

Reave flicked off the lightslicer. The stall was suddenly dark.

'Seven thousand? You've got to be putting me on.'

'I kid you not, old friend. We're the downfall of civilization.'

'How do you stick with this madness?'

Menlo shrugged. 'What did civilization ever do for me?'

'So who's leading this horde from hell?'

'At the moment it's what's called the Council of Four. There's Baptiste, Taraquin, Redrim Protexus, and a newcomer, calls himself Max Zero. He rode in with nine hundred tailored replicas. Big ugly green mothers, over nine feet tall and homicidal crazy. Must have found himself some hellaciious template writer to create those bastards. They do kind of fall apart under stress, but when you're nine foot four and green, sporting four-inch fangs, how much stress do you get?'

Reave looked thoughtful. 'How long can this Council of Four last? The suckers got to be at each other's throats all the time.'

'Sure. It'll get whittled down to one in the end.'

'Maybe their falling out is Krystaleit's only hope.'

Menlo shook his head with great finality. 'Krystaleit doesn't have any hope. It's the big prize. Even if the four of them wiped each other out the army would still come here. It's the jewel in the crown in this section. I wouldn't make any long-term commitments in this burg.'

'How long have we got?'

'There are a hundred or more of us in the city already.'

'You're the fifth column?'

'Fifth, sixth, and seventh. There could be as many as a thousand of us in the city by the time the main force gets here. All ready to hit them from behind. Those local militia boys don't stand a chance.'

Reave watched Menlo as he talked. The mercenary had changed. A real madness, something dark and deep, was riding herd on him.

'So when do they hit us?'

'It'll be a while. This new army moves very slowly. You wouldn't recognize it from the old days. They're actually dragging a big SG with them, so now the army marches through the nothings on its own

continuous environment. They cannibalized the primary generator out of Idleberg. It must weigh twenty tons. They've got it mounted up on these huge plastic rollers, and there're a couple hundred slaves hauling it along on ropes. A dozen or more drop dead every day. Baptiste has to keep on going out raiding for replacements.'

Reave could hardly believe what he was hearing. How could things possibly have escalated so swiftly? It was starting to look as though all of reality was caught up in one vast destructive momentum that, like a mountain avalanche, was rapidly gathering speed.

Menlo derailed Reave's train of thought before it could go any further. 'We'd better get out of here. My partners will think I've fallen in a blowhole. I wouldn't like to have to explain you to them.'

As they stepped out of the stall, a man who could only just manage to piss against the wall looked at them and sneered. 'Stinking can fuckers!'

Without a word Reave and Menlo grabbed him, an arm and a leg each, and dumped him in the nearest blowhole.

'Nobody calls us names, right?'

'Right.'

The two men laughed. For a moment, the old sense of camaraderie was back. Then Menlo glanced up the stairs.

'I've got to go.'

Reave did not immediately tell the Minstrel Boy what he had learned from Menlo Welker. The Minstrel Boy seemed preoccupied, even depressed, after his conversation with Clay Blaisdell. Reave could tell that there was something very messed up about the Minstrel Boy and his attitude to his music, but he had no idea what the problem was. Blaisdell's trio took the stage again, but after a couple of pieces, the Minstrel Boy started to get restless and he and Reave left the Victory Cafe'. They walked deeper into the Bluecat in glum silence, each man completely absorbed in his own thoughts, seemingly oblivious to the antics of all those around them. They, however, were certainly noticed. It was hard to miss the Minstrel Boy with his brand-new belt of knives and Reave with his brace of prominently displayed pistols. People stepped out of their way, and the night had yet to take the rowdy path that they had originally planned for it. Their only encounter was with a mimic in a skin-tight spectra-stocking and reflective makeup, who dogged their footsteps for the distance between two intersections. At first he tossed color shimmers after them; then, getting bored with that, he had himself glow an angry orange and stalked behind them, aping their grim stride. Finally Reave noticed him and turned and glared. The mimic paled to blue and white and scuttled away.

After two more intersections the Minstrel Boy pointed ahead.

'Oysters.'

'Oysters?'

'There's an oyster bar up on the corner.'

A short, plump, red-armed woman wearing a white sarong was splitting oysters and serving them on the half-shell with lemon, hot sauce, and glass mugs of black porter. Reave and the Minstrel Boy walked toward her.

'Did you ever think about the first man to eat an oyster?' the Minstrel Boy mused. 'Now, there was an innovative thinker. Just imagine, he goes to all the trouble of smashing open something that looks like a rock and then eats the slime that he finds inside.'

Reave looked at the Minstrel Boy as though he were nuts. 'As far as I'm concerned, he needn't have bothered. I hate oysters. I got to tell you, I find them disgusting.'

'I love them. I haven't had an oyster since I don't know when.'

'I would have thought they'd have needed oysters in the Caverns.'

'The lack of them was a bad oversight.'

The Minstrel Boy ordered himself a dozen while Reave got by on a couple of mugs of porter.

'So what do we do next?'

The Minstrel Boy slurped down his second oyster and began to prime a third.

'Hell, I don't know. We ain't having too much fun yet. Maybe we should go over and see the girls at the Rising Sun.'

'If that doesn't work, nothing will.'

The Minstrel Boy was on his ninth oyster when he noticed some thing out of the corner of his eye. At first he thought it was a child I coming through the crowd, but as it came closer, he saw the incredibly wizened face. The diminutive figure was either a true dwarf or a munchkin treatment that had gone wrong. Suddenly it darted forward. It was coming straight at the Minstrel Boy, wielding a weird ceramic razor with a mythological beast carved in the blade. The creature swung at the Minstrel Boy's throat.

Reave was looking in the other direction and had not even noticed the tiny killer. The Minstrel Boy jerked back from the arc of the razor. It missed him by a bare inch. His hand went to the knives at his belt. The wrinkled munchkin had turned. He switched the razor to the other hand and slashed again. The Minstrel Boy threw underhand. His old training held good. The flat blade caught the attacker in the throat. It staggered back gagging, ripped the knife out, and hurled it to the ground; then it turned and sprinted to where a platform projected out into empty space. It vaulted the rail and vanished.

The Minstrel Boy ran to the edge and looked over. The body had been caught by a gravity spiral and had dropped heavily to the hard

stone of the level below. A crowd started to gather around the small, still figure. The Minstrel Boy stepped back from the railing. Reave was beside him, pistol in hand. His mug of porter was smashed on the ground.

'What was that all about?'

'Another total stranger took a crack at me.' The Minstrel Boy stooped down and picked up the razor. 'What do you make of this?'

'Never seen anything like it.'

'Looks kind of ceremonial, doesn't it?'

They were starting to attract a crowd of their own. Reave nudged the Minstrel Boy. 'Let's get out of here before the militia shows up.'

As they hurried away, the Minstrel Boy went into a delayed reaction. 'This can't be connected to the last one, can it? I mean, can it?'

Reave was at a loss. 'I'm damned if I know.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

They turned a corner. Halfway down the block was the sun-moon sign of a soothbooth. The Minstrel Boy marched purposefully toward it.

'Well, I'm going to damn well try and find out.'

Reave hurried after him and grabbed him by the arm. 'You ain't going to find out anything in one of those places.'

Anything that had even a nodding acquaintance with the supernatural filled Reave with instant mistrust. Even though the soothbooth operators claimed a scientific basis for their predictions, as far as Reave was concerned fortune-telling was fortune-telling, and no matter how many wires were grafted into the seer's nervous system, it was still worthless unumbo jumbo.

The Minstrel Boy angrily shook himself free. 'I've got to start somewhere,'

'Not in a soothbooth, for God's sake.'

The Minstrel Boy glared at his partner. 'I'll take all the help I can get. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, waiting for someone to snuff me.'

They had reached the soothbooth, and despite Reave's protests, the Minstrel Boy ducked through the door. Outside, the walls were covered with silk hangings emblazoned with mystical symbols, but the interior was not unlike the sanctum of the Datron. The soothsayer was a similar deformed being with the same huge, lopsided potato head and tiny atrophying body. It lay in a similar bath of saline solution. But the soothsayer wore heavy makeup and a bright plastic wrap around the hyperencephalic head, hiding the feedlines and implants. The hardware was less extensive than the complexity that had surrounded the Datron, the biode was smaller, and the tubes and

cables that ran into the soothsayer's head were not the same draped festoons, but the equipment was equally ancient. The soothsayer might well have had the same unnatural high-pitched voice, but electronic modifiers made its tones warm, feminine, and authoritative, clearly designed to set the client at ease.

'You are a seeker after knowledge?' it asked.

'I suppose so.' The Minstrel boy had his own doubts about the value of the soothbooth, but he was driven by desperation.

'Please make a donation of credit.'

The Minstrel Boy dropped his crys into the booth's transaction unit. The unit deducted the standard fee.

'The volunteering of a gratuity can speed the process.'

The Minstrel Boy added a ten percent tip. The soothsayer's eyes, which had been swiveling uncontrollably from side to side, focused on the Minstrel Boy.

'How can I help you?'

'Can you identify an object and give me its history?'

'All things are possible. Do you have the object with you?'

The Minstrel Boy pulled out the ceramic razor that had come so close to cutting his throat. 'It's here.'

'Please hand it to me.'

The soothsayer stretched out its functioning arm toward the Minstrel Boy, who placed the razor in the trembling hand. The soothsayer's eyes began to swivel again. It was silent for a long time. When it finally spoke, its voice had totally changed. No longer soft and feminine, it was harsh and masculine.

'It is a very old thing. It is an evil thing. There has been much blood. .'

Another entity seemed to have taken over the soothsayer. The Minstrel Boy could not tell whether the effect was an example of genuine channeling or merely an electronic trick.

'Where does it come from?' he asked.

'It is the high sacrificial razor of the Zos Kia Cultus.'

'The what?'

The soothsayer paused again before answering.'The Zos Kia Cultus await the coming of Abraxas.'

'What's Abraxas?'

'Abraxas is a god of true antiquity. He is the whip-wielding rooster god with serpent feet in whom light and darkness arc both united and transcended. His worshipers believe that he will free them from the agony of time. They believe that he is the third possibility of the eternally available timeless moment.'

The Minstrel Boy was completely mystified. 'What does this Abraxas have to do with me?'

The soothsayer reverted to its original feminine voice. 'You asked me to identify the object. Further knowledge will require another transaction.'

The Minstrel Boy knew that the bite was being put on him. At that moment Reave, who had been waiting outside, ducked into the booth.

'You're not buying this garbage, are you?'

'I've gone this far. I might as well get the rest.'

The Minstrel Boy dropped his crys into the transaction unit a second time and added a second gratuity. The soothsayer's eyes focused on him again.

'Give me your hand.'

The Minstrel Boy, with some reluctance, grasped the soothsayer's hand. It was cold, limp, and moist. After a further pause, the masculine voice was back.

'You are a designated victim.'

'That was back at the Caverns. What does it have to do with this Abraxas cult?'

'You have been touched by the wafer.'

'The wafer?'

'The crystal wafer of the Hunters. You accepted it.'

'I smashed that thing.'

'But you touched it.'

Reave leaned close to the Minstrel Boy. 'Get out of here before you make yourself crazy.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. He concentrated on the soothsayer. 'Why should the fact of me touching the crystal make some mad munchkin want to slash me?'

'You are tainted by the crystal wafer. The homicides recognize this. They know that you are not only fair game but that if they kill you, they will also gain grace with the Presence. Already a follower of nu-Kali has tried to slay you.'

The Minstrel Boy raised an eyebrow. How had the soothsayer gotten that bit of data? 'Are you telling me that any mad killer can sniff me out?'

'Only the ones who have a spiritual frame of reference.'

'Is there any way I can get rid of this taint? I can't have religious maniacs stalking me like dogs after a bitch in heat.'

'You can no more lift the taint than you can remove radiation contamination.'

'Are you telling me that I'm doomed?'

'We are all doomed.'

'Yeah, but I'd like to know how doomed I am.'

' Do you wish to know the day and hour of your death?'

'No, but. .'

'Very well.'

There was a pause before the Minstrel Boy asked the next question.

'Will this taint ever pass?'

'All things will pass.'

'That's not the answer I was looking for.'

'We live in the hour of the great upheaval. There will be more things to occupy your time than just this threat.'

'That's hardly a comfort.'

'You didn't come here looking for comfort, Minstrel Boy.'

'I didn't? So what did I come in here for?'

Reave muttered under his breath. 'That's the first intelligent question you've come up with.'

The soothsayer ignored Reave. 'You came in here looking for understanding, and now you understand.'

'I do?'

'You will.'

Reave snorted contemptuously. 'This is double-talk.'

The Minstrel Boy was thinking. 'I have one more question.'

'Ask it.'

'How can it be that all these old gods are suddenly expected to materialize? I mean, we've already had brushes with the kali-rouge and now this Abraxas. And it all seems to be hooked in to the Presence. What's going on?'

Reave sighed. 'You're asking some freak who lives in a bath of saline solution to explain what's going on?'

Again he was ignored.

'These are the final days of man. It is natural that some should turn to the old gods and the ancient unseen forces.'

'The final days of man?'

'That's what I said.'

'These are the final days of man?'

'Do you doubt that?'

Before the Minstrel Boy could reply, the soothsayer's eyes started to swivel. He had clearly had his money's worth.

> *There would appear to be little doubt that in the period right before the Final Cataclysm, a noticable percentage of the human population sought refuge in archaic and, all too often, bloodily chaotic religions and attempted to invoke the dark, ancient gods of their savage*

ancestors. As with so much of this era's human history, the truth is lost in the destruction, and all that remains is speculation and debate. The most popular theory, although never thoroughly borne out by the surviving evidence, is that the flock to the gods was a simple, latter-day crowd madness, most probably a panic reaction to the situation being created by the metaphysicians. Another school of thought argues that, sensing the imminent Final Cataclysm, large numbers of human beings retreated into a snarling atavism. The ironic part of this debate is that by far the majority of the contemporary accounts suggest that these ancient deities were present entities somehow loosed on the Damaged World. Even Yeovil himself, normally the most rationally secular of observers, at one point in The Trouble with Titans appears to imply that the forces that would ultimately produce catastrophe gave material life to these arcane fantasy figments and made it possible for them to stalk reality as a prelude to the eventual and absolute terror. Even in these singularly confusing times this idea seems far too fanciful to be anything but the momentary aberration of a great mind.

— Pressdra Vishearia

CHAPTER NINE

Billy Oblivion waited in the lobby of the Leader Hotel. Billy hated to wait for anything. Patience was not among his virtues. The other two were well overdue, and for what had to be the seventy-third time, he was asking himself where the hell they were. A waitress approached. Billy eyed her balefully. The waitresses at the Leader Hotel were too goddamn clone-perfect. They had no blemishes. In fact, they looked practically sterile. A fantasy of her torrid degradation flashed in front of his inner eye, but he was too tense and anxious to pursue it. When he had first arrived in Krystaleit, he had felt considerably better than he had in a very long time. The waiting, however, was getting to him. Something was slipping back. There were scrabblings in his mind.

The waitress was standing over him. 'Can I get you something, sir?'

Billy stared up at the woman's outstanding breasts. There was something gravity-defying about the way they swelled against the stretch silk of her formal cheongsam. He imagined ripping away the material, but then he sighed and nodded. 'You can get me the same again.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy had been gone for more than twelve hours and were probably lying drunk in some whorehouse down in the Bluecat. Their absence was creating a problem. Renatta had vanished, and if they did not put in an appearance soon, he would have to deal with her disappearance on his own. He was not sure that he was in any shape to be going out solo to look for the woman. Waiting in the lobby was enough of a strain. He was starting to twitch at shadows. On the other side of the lobby, right by the gilt check-in desk, a gray middle-aged man and an attractive young woman seemed to be staring in his direction. He startedto curl down into his chair. His memory had deteriorated so badly over the last couple of years that he could no longer trust himself to recognize faces before they recognized him.

The serious damage to Billy's nervous system, as opposed to the routine recreational damage, had started back in that room in the Pale Rooster, back there in Stowellberg when Haun Geep and the Griddling brothers had caught up with him. They had tied him down on the bed and shot lyrnphane straight in through his eye sockets. The convulsions had lasted for fifty-four hours, and after that he had never again been able to perceive the color green. Grass was now a wholly new color that did not have a name and, as far as he could tell, was known only to him. The times he had wandered in the nothings with

no guidance, no sense of time, and loaded to the gills on cyclatrol had compounded the mess inside his head, and the varying levels of spiritual stress that had been inflicted on him during his sojourn at the Sanctuary had set the ruins of his mind into bizarre and disturbing patterns. It could only be a matter of time before the other two realized just how bad his condition really was. And where the hell were they, anyway?

To his relief, he spotted two figures stumbling through the main revolving doors. He quickly stood up and went to meet them.

'We have a problem,' he announced,

Reave and the Minstrel Boy were leaning on each other for support. They stared at him, blank and drunk.

'We do? Tha's terrible.'

Reave began vehemently shaking his head. 'We don't have no problems. We drunk, which is exactly how we wants to be.'

Billy noticed that the Minstrel Boy had a brand-new knife belt strapped across his hips. One of the knives was already missing. A hotel houseman in gold and white livery was drifting in their direction, and some of the other guests were giving the three of them nervous looks. With Reave as drunk as he was, with pistols jutting aggressively from his belt, the situation had the potential for an explosion. Billy decided to give it to them straight.

'Renatta's gone.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy looked at him with blank alcoholic eyes. They did not seem in the least concerned.

'So?'

'So she went out three hours ago and hasn't come back.'

'So she's gone. So what?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded solemnly. 'She's had all three of us, and now she's moved on. Shit happens. She's probably fulfilled a childhood ambition. She's laid the DMA Cowboys. I hope it sits well with her.'

Reave put a fatherly arm around Billy's shoulder. 'Listen to me, Billy boy. Listen to your old buddy Reave. You don't want to worry about it. There'll be another one along in a minute, and in the meantime, there's always the whores.'

Billy impatiently shook himself free. 'You don't understand. She went out to look around, but I don't think she knew that she was all but out of credit after last night. If she tried to buy anything more than a couple of drinks, she'd hit the zero and make the indigent roster. Shit, any slaver could have picked her up by now.'

Reave pushed back his hat and scratched his head. 'That's like a really fucking stupid thing to do. Why didn't you warn her?'

'I was too hung over.'

The Minstrel Boy abruptly sat down. 'I feel awful.'

The hotel houseman was hovering closer. Billy tried to ease the others toward the elevators.

'I really think that we should do something about finding her. Why don't we go upstairs and see if she's shown up on any of the lists?'

It was the Minstrel Boy's turn to shake his head. 'Not me, Billy. I'm too sick to go rescuing damsels in distress, and besides, I've got half the world's death cults looking to kill me. Renatta's going to have to take care of herself.'

Billy turned on him angrily. 'You can't be that cold.'

The Minstrel Boy knew that he was being childish, but he didn't care. His speech was slurred and petulant. 'Sure I can. She was that cold with me.'

Reave agreed with him. 'Yeah, screw her. She'll have to look after herself. She dumped me, too.'

Billy's voice turned hard and quiet. 'She hadn't dumped me.'

The Minstrel Boy's laugh was mocking and unpleasant. 'So you just want to go save her because you think you can get some more of that good loving.'

'She became our partner, damn it.'

Reave scowled. 'Did she? Or was she just a bimbo along for the ride?'

The houseman chose that moment to say his piece. 'Are you gentlemen guests of the hotel?'

Billy tried to head off the houseman before Reave noticed him. 'Yes, of course we are.'

'Then perhaps you'd be more comfortable somewhere less-'

'Somewhere less what?' Reave growled. He had the expression of a man deciding whether he should throw an offending individual through a gold mirror.

The houseman stood his ground, and his hand dropped to his discreet, gold-plated sidearm. 'You're starting to distress some of the other guests. I'm sure you understand. Perhaps one of the small bars. .'

Reave's temperature seemed to be rising toward boiling. Billy looked around for some kind of help from the Minstrel Boy, but the Minstrel Boy was sunk in his chair, leaning forward with his head in his hands. Then Reave did an abrupt mood shift. He suddenly grinned at the houseman.

'You're the cutest little soldier I ever seen.'

'I really don't want any trouble, sir.'

Reave blinked. 'Trouble? Little man, you don't even know what trouble is.'

Billy quickly took him by the arm. 'Come on, Reave. Let's get out of here. We've got a lot to talk about.'

To his surprise and relief, Reave did not argue. 'Yeah, what the hell. Let's get out of here.'

Billy looked down at the Minstrel Boy. 'What about you? Are you going to come with us?'

The Minstrel Boy looked up. 'Yeah, I guess so.' He struggled to his feet and stood swaying. 'I ain't rescuing no damsels, though.'

Back in his room the Minstrel Boy stirred a whole package of alcopeak into a glass of water. Within seconds of drinking the foaming mixture, he was sledgehammered by a blinding headache. It felt as though his eyes were going to drop out, but he was coming off the drunk. He stripped off his clothes and sought refuge in the cleanse-and-massage. While he was in there, his newfound sobriety started him regretting the way he had behaved over the loss of Renatta.

He dressed in clean clothes and headed for Billy's room. When he arrived, Reave was already there, also having apparently undergone a gruff change of heart.

'So what are we going to do about this damn woman?'

'Let's find out if she's got herself listed.' Billy looked up at the mirror ceiling. It was a deep bottle-green. When he had first seen it, he had felt that getting a green room had been something of a dirty trick. It was certainly in line with his current luck. 'Room intelligence, please activate.'

'How can I serve you?'

Billy ran down Renatta's vital codes, which were scanty, to say the least. After about five seconds a head-and-shoulders hologram of a particularly sullen-looking Renatta appeared in midair.

'Renatta de Luxe. Credit count 0–0. Indigent. Claimed by Buzznoose Enterprises, who paid minimum flesh value to city for title.'

'Damn.'

'The slavers have got her already.'

The Minstrel Boy regarded the hologram thoughtfully. 'I don't see exactly what we can do.'

Billy waved the image away. 'We can go and get her back.'

'Not legally.'

'Did that ever bother us before?'

Reave shrugged. 'I guess we could buy her back.'

The Minstrel Boy was still pessimistic. 'I doubt that we've got the credit, unless we're going to run ourselves into trouble. These slavers can pretty much ask what they want for her.'

Reave nodded. 'You're probably right. She's good-looking, and they'll sure as shit want a fortune for her.'

Billy was starting to look a little desperate. Saving Renatta had started to take on the proportions of a test of his continuing ability to cut it.

'We can lean on them, can't we?' he asked. 'I mean, are the DNA Cowboys going to back down to a bunch of stinking slavers?'

'I thought we didn't call ourselves that.'

'You know what I mean.'

The Minstrel Boy's face was chilly. 'I know you're getting crazy over this woman.'

Billy and the Minstrel Boy glared at each other. Reave made a time-out sign.

'Okay, okay, there's no reason why we shouldn't give it a shot. Get the address of the slavers, and we'll go and see what they're all about. There's always the chance that they'll be sailing close to the law and we'll be able to make a deal with them.'

The warehouse that provided premises for Buzznoose Enterprises was on Tepper Lane, a back street in a faceless, twilight part of the city near the spot where the big exhaust tubes vented the city's waste products out into the nothings. The air smelled of sulfur, and the light was dim and greenish yellow. It was a grimy, nondescript windowless building. The only thing that showed that Buzznoose occupied the place was a tiny hand-lettered sign. The DNA Cowboys stared around cautiously.

'It looks sleazy enough.'

'Isn't that what we want?'

Billy hit the door chimes. At first nothing happened. Then a peephole in the door slid open, and a pair of furtive eyes looked out.

'You want something?'

Billy answered for the three of them. Despite an ongoing squirreling behind his eyes, he was making every effort to keep a semblance of control over the situation. Rescuing Renatta had been his idea, after all.

'We're looking for Buzznoose Enterprises.'

'Well, you found it.'

'We want to talk to someone about making a deal.'

'You want to make a purchase?'

'Maybe. If we see the right item.'

'You have to lodge a refundable deposit before you can inspect the merchandise.'

Billy looked outraged. 'That's absurd.'

'It keeps out the weirds looking for a cheap thrill.'

'Do we look like weirds?'

The eyes beyond the peephole were impassive. 'Weirds come in all shapes and sizes. If you want to come inside, you pay the deposit. It's as simple as that.'

Billy scowled. 'Okay, okay, we'll pay the deposit.'

The man behind the door was a swarthy individual with gold earrings and a scar down his cheek that told of a past checkered by violence. A pair of pistols, not unlike Reave's, were thrust into a wide studded belt. He indicated a chipped transaction unit set up behind the door. 'You make your deposit here.'

Reave placed his crys in the unit and slowly surveyed the place. 'So where do we find the boss? The headman?'

The swarthy individual shook his head. 'You don't talk to the boss; you talk to me.'

Reave leaned very close to him. 'Listen, sonny boy. I didn't come here to talk to the help.'

The man's hand moved toward his pistol, but Reave was quicker. His fingers locked around the man's wrist. He applied leverage and pressure.

'Do you understand me? I only talk to bosses. I have a rule about that.'

The man's jaws clenched as he tried not to flinch. Reave increased the pressure. Finally the pain was too much.

'Okay, you win. You're breaking my wrist.'

In a few moments Mempha Buzznoose himself arrived, flanked by four burly minders, hard-eyed men wearing pachuco hair nets and lots of gold jewelry. They were slapping power-down electric clubs against their hands.

Buzznoose had a mouthful of gold teeth. 'You wanted to see me?'

The Minstrel Boy was certain that the slaver was the same one they had seen with a string of sad, red-haired duplicate teenagers just after they had arrived in town. Buzznoose was fat and oily, swathed in a blue silk kaftan and carrying a short, gold-topped swagger cane under his right arm.

Billy looked the man up and down, all too conscious that the other two were waiting to see what he would do. It was time to pull himself together and prove that there was still something left of him. He had to create an aura around himself. He pushed the squirreling into one of the side tracks of his mind and took a deep mental breath; then he snapped his cuffs and squared his shoulders. The gesture helped a lot.

'We'd like to inspect your inventory,' he said.

His voice had not quite come out as strong, smooth, and authoritarian as he might have hoped, but Buzznoose's eyes were instantly watchful.

'You would, would you?'

Billy tried for cold and patrician and almost made it. The squirreling was actually quiet. 'Isn't that what you're here for? I mean, you sell slaves, don't you?'

'We don't like to use that word.'

'You can use whatever euphemism pleases you. We are here to make purchases, and we want to see what you've got.'

Buzznoose was still cagey, but he seemed to be buying the act. He was unconsciously rubbing his hands together. His fat fingers were encrusted with turquoise and gold rings.

'What exactly did you have in mind?'

Billy looked down his nose with contemptuous superiority, all the while warning himself not to overdo it. He felt stronger. He was warming into the performance. Damn it, but he could feel his aura growing. He could pull it off if he did not lose his concentration.

'We'll let you know when we see it. We are purchasing agents for a visiting dignitary who intends to avail herself fully of this city's liberal attitudes toward human purchase.'

Buzznoose was really rubbing his hands together. He seemed on the verge of bowing. 'I would be happy to escort you through the stock pens personally.'

There was an almost forgotten excitement growing inside Billy's chest. For too long he had been nothing but the underdog. The other two were ready to follow Buzznoose, but Billy did not move.

'I must warn you. We are only interested in the exceptional.'

The other two shot him glances that warned of the dangers of overacting, but Buzznoose did not appear to notice. He flashed a gleaming gold smile and became a model of obsequiousness.

'Would you please follow me?'

As they followed Buzznoose down a flight of narrow stairs, the doorman looked curiously after them. Billy ignored him. He was over the first hurdle — his own fear of himself. He felt good. He could cope.

Buzznoose's stock in trade was housed in the block-sized basement of the building. It smelled of depression, ammonia, and overcooked vegetables. It reminded Billy of a prison — which, to all effects and in everything but name, it was. The merchandise was penned up in rows of plexiglass cubes some eight feet long on each side. Red track lighting presumably was intended to display the goods as flatteringly as possible; it also made the place look like a zoo in hell. Most of the prisoners were naked except tor wrist and ankle bracelets and control collars. Most looked exceedingly depressed. By some strange irony, an invisible music system was piping chirpy computer music into the cubes. If it was supposed to lift the spirits of the inmates, it was not working.

As Buzznoose led the DNA Cowboys slowly down the aisle between the cubes, they passed a pair of blond, perfect muscleboys and more of the red-haired teenagers. A trio of apparently custom-

created, very tall blue albino women regarded them with rigid, rigor mortis smiles that were negated by their sorry mournful eyes. A whole gang of dwarfs snarled and squabbled among themselves, and there were two exquisite miniature butterfly women, no more than eighteen inches tall and perfect in every detail. Buzznoose seemed to indulge heavily in template replicas and template custom rewrites. It was only good business to ensure that each slave, and even the variations of each slave, could be reproduced to the max.

Billy glanced at Buzznoose. 'You do realize that if we make a purchase, we would expect exclusive rights to the creature. Our employer would not like it if you continued to turn out duplicates from the template of what would then be her property.'

Buzznoose smiled ingratiatingly. 'Anything can be arranged if the price is right.'

At each cube they passed Buzznoose would rap sharply on the dirty armored plastic with his swagger cane, bringing those locked inside to their feet. Some jumped up as though they were terrified of Buzznoose and his minders; some, particularly the multiple duplicates, even tried their best to come on to the visitors, as though they really were eager to be purchased and taken out of the place. One of the red-haired teenagers was close to obscene in her efforts to attract their attention. From his own experience with only one duplicate, Billy could imagine how much of a living hell it must have been to be locked in with seven replicas of oneself.

Not all the inmates were quite so enthusiastic. When Buzznoose rapped on some cubes, those inside could only shuffle listlessly to their feet and stare at the visitors with dead eyes that obviously only expected to see their situation go from bad to worse. One thickset, bullheaded man with crazyspasms who looked as though he would be fit only for treadmill work actually charged the clear plastic wall, smashing at it repeatedly with his head. Two of Buzznoose's minders were dispatched to beat the man senseless with their electric clubs. It seemed that discipline, as applied to the merchandise, was instant and brutal. They did not even have to worry about damaging the goods: Blows from an electric club, though painful in the extreme, left no marks or permanent scars.

There were twenty plexiglass cubes to each aisle, and threeaisles ran the length of the basement Almost all the cubes were full. Either Buzznoose liked to maintain an extensive human menagerie, or his stock was not moving too fast. They walked down two aisles and were turning into the third. Buzznoose was starting to become anxious. Nothing appeaired to catch the interest of his supposed potential clients. So when everyone came to a full stop in front of the fifth cube in the third aisle, he looked considerably relieved.

'You like this one?'

Billy slipped out of character and let out a low whistle. 'Holy shit!'

Renatta de Luxe was the sole occupant of the cube. She was hanging by upstretched arms, her manacled wrists chained to a support hook in the roof of the cube. She was naked, and her legs and torso were covered with thin red welts. She had been beaten, and certainly not with anything as subtle as an electric club. It looked like the work of an old-fashioned whip. Her head hung down, and her hair obscured her face. Her body had taken a great deal of abuse; in addition, it was either drenched in sweat or had been oiled.

'What happened to this one?'

If Buzznoose had noticed Billy's lapse, he did not show it. 'She became violently uncooperative, and my people were forced to make an example of her. You have no idea how much trouble a single unchecked disruptive influence can cause in a place like this.'

Billy was very much aware that the other two were looking at him, waiting for him to make the next move. He had come into the place playing it by ear, with no real, comprehensive plan. Suddenly the inspiration for which he had been waiting struck. He faced Buzznoose.

'Do you know who you're holding here?'

Buzznoose, taking the question at face value, consulted a small data file attached to the cube's plexiglass front.

'Sure. She's an indigent. Used to be called Renatta de Luxe. She hit the zero, and we picked up title for minimum flesh. She's also a troublemaker. She may take a little taming, but at least she has spirit. Did you think that your client might have a use for her?'

Billy grimly shook his head as he examined the data display. 'You clearly don't know who you have here.'

Buzznoose was starting to look worried. 'I don't?'

'You're in a lot of trouble.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Billy took a deep breath. 'The woman you have hung up in there is none other than Deeja Vespasian, the eldest daughter of the prefect of Garth. She's kind of wild, and she's been staying in the city indulging in the kind of vices that attract the young, wealthy, and powerful to Krystaleit. She was reported missing this morning. I don't know how she came to hit the zero, but it must have been some kind of mistake or misunderstanding.'

Buzznoose was starting to display extreme agitation. 'I bought the damned woman in good faith. Check with the city.'

'I doubt that the prefect will see it that way. When he hears what you've done to his daughter, he probably won't be too interested in your faith, good or otherwise.'

Billy was very well aware that Reave and the Minstrel Boy were looking at him with veiled admiration. He warmed to his fantasy. The minders, on the other hand, were starting to become edgy and ill at ease. But Buzznoose seemed to be swallowing the fiction whole. He was starting to melt.

'Who is this prefect?'

'He's the virtual dictator of Garth. He's a brutal despot whose unpleasantness is rivaled only by his paranoia. He has a particularly well-developed sense of revenge, and he dotes on his degenerate daughter. I'd say the least that he'd do to you is to hire a couple of Nulites to blow this place to rubble.'

Buzznoose might have been worried, but he was hardly straight out of the nothings. 'How do I know there's a grain of truth in any of this?'

Billy shrugged. 'You don't.'

'It could be an elaborate con.'

'It could be, except that I haven't asked you for anything. All I've done is give you a piece of valuable information absolutely for nothing.'

One of the minders leaned close to Buzznoose and whispered something. The slaver nodded and looked at Billy.

'How do you know about all this?'

'We make our way through reality by knowing things.'

Buzznoose was sweating profusely. 'Suppose I accept that what you're telling me is true? Is there anything I can do about this? I mean, is there some way I can get rid of her? It's really the city's fault. Can't I just dump her on the street and make like I never seen her?'

Billy coldly shook his head. 'No, I doubt there's anything you can do.' He glanced at Reave and the Minstrel Boy. 'I think we should get out of here right now. We can't afford to be connected to this man in any way. The prefect will string up this idiot by his thumbs when he sees what he's done to her.' He turned on his heel and started marching back the way they had come. The Minstrel Boy and Reave fell in behind him.

'Now what?' Reave whispered.

'Keep your fingers crossed.'

'Hey, wait!' Buzznoose called after them. 'Wait just a moment.'

As Billy turned, he winked at Reave, 'Here we go.'

He faced Buzznoose. 'There's really nothing I can do for you. I've told you.'

'You can't just walk in here and drop this bomb on me and then leave. There's got to be some way out of this.'

'You might be able to skip town — although the prefect is quite capable of finding you. He's also relentless. It would be a matter of

honor.' Despite his seemingly negative attitude, Billy was already walking back toward the slaver.

Buzznoose's voice was practically a wail. 'I've never even heard of this place Garth.'

'That's hardly going to have an effect on the prefect.'

'Can't you do something? You seem to know a whole lot of people.'

Billy stopped in his tracks. 'You must be joking. My partners and I can't risk our reputations and maybe even our health to bail you out.'

'Maybe you could talk to the girl. Prevail on her that it wasn't my fault she got herself listed.'

Billy folded his arms. 'That might have been possible if your goons hadn't given her that whipping.'

'She was disruptive — '

'And you had to make an example of her. Yes, yes, I heard you the first time.'

Buzznoose was pleading. 'Give me a break. Hell, I'd make it worth your while.'

Billy made an impatient gesture. 'Okay, okay, I'll tell youwhat I'll do. We'll take the girl and try and cover things up. We'll need money. Hard currency, though, no local credit.'

Suddenly Buzznoose's eyes narrowed. 'Now you're asking me for something, aren't you? You're asking me for quite a lot.'

Billy's anger was cold steel. His hands signaled total dismissal. 'Now you insult me.'

Buzznoose was fatally torn. 'I. .'

Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy and Reave and jabbed a finger toward the way out. 'We're leaving. This man is an oaf.'

The Minstrel Boy chose that moment to interrupt the proceedings. 'Before anyone goes anywhere, you'd all better take a look at this.'

Up to that moment all the concentration had been on Renatta in the fifth cube. Nobody had bothered to look in the sixth one. Inside it, four duplicates sat cross-legged on the floor. Their eyes were dull, and their expressions drugged.

Billy looked hard at Buzznoose. 'This really complicates matters.'

Buzznoose was rapidly shaking his head. 'No, no, take the girl. I can dispose of these.'

Billy glared at him. 'You can't kill them. You understand that? This is a matter of hereditary power and the divine right of prefects. If so much as one part of one body was found. . ' He let the horror that would fall on Buzznoose remain unstated. 'You'll have to take them a long way from here, wipe their memories, and turn them loose.'

'I'll do it. I'll do it. Just take the girl. I'll get you the money.'

Billy pointed to the Renatta in the fifth cube. 'I'm presuming that

this one is the original.'

Buzznoose nodded eagerly. 'Yes, yes, that's the original.'

At that, one of the duplicates raised her head. 'She's not the original. I'm the original.' She seemed to be confused and tobe having difficulty focusing her eyes.

The other women took up a slurred chorus.

'I'm the original.'

'I'm the original.'

Just as Billy was starting to worry that things were getting out of hand, Reave caught hold of Buzznoose's aim.

'There is one other thing that might help placate the prefect s daughter when we get her away from here.'

'What's that?'

'Those two little butterfly women. They might help take her mind off her injuries.'

Billy looked at Reave as though he had gone crazy. What the hell was he up to now?

Buzznoose, however, was at the stage where he would agree to anything. 'Sure, sure, whatever you say.'

While the slaver was away making the arrangements, one of his minders moved to get Renatta from the cage. Billy waved him away. 'I'll get her.'

He let himself into the cube. When he reached up and loosened Renatta's manacles, she sagged against him.

'I thought you were never going to get here.'

Billy spoke to her in a voice that was too low for the minders to hear. 'Can you walk?'

'Sure, if you just give me a minute,'

'Did they hurt you badly?'

'I've been through worse in the Caverns, and that was supposed to be fun.'

The duplicates were solemnly watching through two thicknesses of plexiglass.

'Can you keep your mouth shut and make like a princess?' Billy asked.

'If that's what you want. I heard the conversation. These cubes aren't soundproof. You've got a lot of nerve for a damage case, Billy Oblivion.'

Billy looked smugly modest. 'I was just on a roll.'

He helped her down from the cube and waved to the minders. 'Get her some clothes. Quickly, now.'

As Renatta dressed, Buzznoose returned with the cash and the two butterfly girls, who looked extremely apprehensive as they were handed over to Reave.

'I'll see you out,' the slaver offered.

Billy stopped him. 'Don't bother. We'll find our own way. You start to arrange the dispersal of those duplicates.'

As they walked away, the duplicates, despite the drugs they had been given, set up a desperate clamor. On the stairs leading up from the basement Renatta whispered to Billy.

'We've got to get out of here real fast. It won't be too long before those duplicates decide to tell the slaver who we all really are.'

'Why should they do that?'

'Pure spite at being left behind.'

'How do you know that?'

'It's what I'd do, and they're exact copies of me.'

They filed past a very surprised looking door minder. Reave was carrying the two butterfly girls. Once they were out of the door and around the first corner, he set them down.

'Okay, beat it.'

The two butterfly girls looked at him in blank amazement. They spoke in unison in high melodic voices.

'What are you talking about?'

It was Reave's turn to be surprised. 'I'm setting you free. You can go. I've rescued you. Get out of here before Buzz-noose's goons come after us trying to make trouble.'

'Are you crazy? We can't survive out here around normals. We're tailored pets. Someone has to look after us. If you put us down here, we could be eaten by a cat, or worse. Life's tough when you're only eighteen inches tall. You ought to try it sometime. It ain't just singing Mothra.'

'I can't look after you.'

'Then you're an asshole. You know what we're going to have to do?'

Reave shook his head. The butterfly girls looked at him with expressions of complete contempt.

'We're going to have to hide out in a drain or somewhere until things have cooled down, and then we'll have to go back to Buzznoose, and he'll punish us. We need an owner, goddamn it, not a fucking white knight.'

Before Reave could say anything, Renatta raised the alarm.

'Here's trouble right now.'

A knot of what could only be Buzznoose's goons, reinforced by some of the neighborhood lowlife, came running around the corner. There were maybe a dozen of them, all carrying powerclubs or shockbillies. Only a few were armed with projectile weapons, but those few were more than enough to start a spattering of particle beams and bullets hissing and whining around Renatta and the DNA

Cowboys.

The quarry scattered in different directions. Billy crouched, preparing to take off running; Renatta dived into a doorway; the Minstrel Boy whipped out his Colt, returned fire, and dived for cover. The butterfly girls disappeared into a culvert. Only Reave stood his ground.

'I'm tired of taking shit from everyone who wants to hand it out!' he roared. 'Come on! Let's fuck them up!'

Both his pistols were out, and he had laid down a one-man fusillade. The Minstrel Boy lay flat, shooting with care. Reave was still roaring defiance.

'Firepower, boyos! Nothing beats firepower!'

He kept on firing, flamboyantly spinning his pistols. Three of Buzznoose's men went down in the first burst. The others slowed up considerably. It was one thing to beat up a trio of con men, totally another to face down a seemingly crazy, heavily armed gunman. The Minstrel Boy was getting to his feet. Firing as they went, he and Reave slowly advanced on their pursuers. Billy brought up the rear, the goon squad was still out of range of his little needler.

The Minstrel Boy squared his shoulders as the Colt bucked in his hand. The old feeling was back. They were standing tall again, reckless and dangerous gods. They did not give a damn. Bullets hummed past them and beams flashed, but the bad guys could not touch them. They had the aura, the big, old three-way aura that would not let them be touched, just like in the old days. Two more of Buzznoose's men went down, and the others took to their heels. Reave kept walking and firing. He picked off one more before he and the Minstrel Boy lowered their weapons.

Reave pushed back his plumed hat and cracked a broad grin. 'Damn me, but that feels a whole lot better.'

The Minstrel Boy spun his pistol and dropped it into its holster. 'Damn me, but it does.'

Reave glanced wolfishly at Billy. 'That was some con you ran back there, Billy boy. You had him going with that prefect of Garth shit. I didn't know you had it in you anymore.'

Billy shrugged. In fact, he was desperately tired, but he refused to let anyone know that. 'Hell, it's easy running a con. You don't have to be yourself. You're anyone but yourself. That's what makes it easy.'

As Billy said the words, the abyss yawned in front of him and the squirreling came back with a vengeance, but he did not go down. The other two were beside him, and the bonding held him in place. The old triad could still do the business.

While Renatta watched with a look of bemused confusion, the three of them broke into peals of loud laughter that was well off the

edge of sanity.

> *When searching for a nutshell summation of humanity in its final days, we really have to look no farther than the writings of Vendocine: 'As usual, man was busily entangling himself in his ambiguities. This time, however, he tripped, fell, and cracked his head.'*
>
> *— Pressdra Vishnstria*

CHAPTER TEN

There was someone beating on the door. The Minstrel boy struggled out of an ocean of deep sleep and dreams that were filled with unfocused rushing. The beating on the door continued. He was suddenly very awake. His hand was under the pillow, snakelike, closing around the Colt. He deliberately kept his voice slurred and blurred. 'Who is it? What do you want?'

'Will you please open this door — right now!'

Goddamn it to hell. It was official. The Minstrel Boy threw back the covers. Had that bastard Buzznoose lodged a complaint? He swung his legs over the side of the bed with a groan. Officialdom was beating on the door again.

'Open this door or we'll break it down.'

The Minstrel Boy stood up, fighting off what had the makings of a blinding headache. 'Okay, okay, I'm coming, I'm coming. Don't go nuts.'

The suite was a disaster area. Some hours earlier it had seen the final throes of a very bizarre celebration of Renatta de Luxe's regained freedom, so bizarre, in fact, that he still could not really believe a lot of what had happened. It had started with Renatta demanding, after a few drinks, to know why they had not rescued at least two of the duplicates that the slaver had made of her. 'Then you could have had one of me each.' That had produced the obvious comment that one of her was quite enough. From then on, through the rest of the night, things had escalated as Renatta had determinedly sought to prove that one of her was indeed quite enough for all three of them. The affair had culminated with the ingestion of a gourmet pyschedelic with the fanciful name Infamy. That had been followed by a prolonged bout of erotic contortions that spanned most of the spectrum of what could be achieved by three men and one woman acting in harmony. It appeared to be a new phase or at least a new interlude in the already complicated relationship between Renatta and the DNA Cowboys. As far as the Minstrel Boy was concerned, it was a development that only deepened the mystery of what exactly it was she wanted from them.

Fresh pounding on the door brought him forcibly back to the present.

'Give me a break, will you?'

The Minstrel Boy placed the gun out of sight but within easy reach; then he unlocked and opened the door. Three militiamen and a purple-robed bureaucrat were standing there. The militiamen were armed with lightweight bolt throwers and looked hair-trigger nervous. The Minstrel Boy was certain that they were there to arrest him.

'What do you want? I was sleeping.'

The bureaucrat looked past him at the wreckage of the suite with disapprovingly pursed lips. 'Are you the one who goes by the name of Billy Oblivion?'

'No.'

The bureaucrat frowned. 'Are you the one they call the Minstrel Boy?'

'Do you have a warrant?'

'Why should I have a warrant? I'm here to serve a Notice of Demand.'

'What in hell is a Notice of Demand?'

'A Notice of Demand for Contracted Services.'

'What does that mean?'

'Are you the Minstrel Boy?'

The Minstrel Boy was suddenly impatient with all the fencing. 'Yeah, yeah, that's me. Now, tell me what's going on.'

'By the powers that are vested in me by the Ruling Elite of the city of Krystaleit I formally serve notice that your contractual services are demanded herewith.'

'And what does all that mean?'

'The city's defense forces have gone to readiness. You are under contract as a master warrior, and you will report to your unit within the next twenty-four hours.'

'I don't have a unit. All I have is a contract.'

The bureaucrat looked worried. 'You should have been assigned a unit when you entered contracts.'

'I wasn't assigned a damn thing.'

The bureaucrat took an ornate ivory showdata from his sleeve. What he saw did not appear to please him. 'You're right, there's no assigned unit filed on your chart.'

The Minstrel Boy started to close the door. 'So let me know when you sort it out.'

'I'll have to do that. You should still hold yourself in readiness, though.'

'I will, don't worry.'

'Can you tell me where I can find Billy Oblivion?'

'I've never heard of him.'

The Minstrel Boy leaned against the closed door. Even with the reprieve of an administrative screw up, it was very bad news. The defense forces being put on readiness had to tie in with what Reave had heard from his old raiding partner, the one he had met in the toilet of the Victory Cafe. Someone in the city government must have received warning of the approach of the overwhelming force of raiders.

The Minstrel Boy knew that he had to talk to Billy and Reave straightaway. The last thing they needed was to become involved in a war, particularly a war in which they were on what was sure to be the losing side. Once again he quickly cleaned himself and dressed. He could not remember when he had last enjoyed the luxury of idling over breakfast. Twenty minutes saw the three of them, plus an exhausted-looking Renatta, gathered in Reave's suite.

Billy tackled the problem head on.

'If you ask me, I think it's high time to desert.'

Reave wasn't so sure.

'We'll never make a reputation by running away.'

The Mistrel Boy laughed.

'We always did before.'

Despite the jokes and despite an afterglow of devil-may-care that lingered from the minor victory of the street fight, they knew that their predicament was serious. It took Reave to voice what everyone else was thinking.

'There's no two ways about it. We're going to have to sneak away from this fight. If Baptiste and the other warlords really do have over seven thousand troops in the field, plus a fifth column inside the city, the defense forces are going to becreamed. I certainly don't intend to be creamed along with them. This is definitely not our fight.'

Sneaking away required no strategy or finesse. They simply packed the belongings they wanted to take with them, checked out of the Leader Hotel, and started off in a direction that would take them to the platforms leading to the nothings. As they walked, it became all too clear that Krystaleit had gone on military alert. The whole tone of the city had changed. It was somber. The lights seemed dimmer, and there was a tension in the air as though the very structures themselves were waiting for the coming of a terrifying unknown. Everywhere there were people on the move. Squads of militia, in their forage caps and drab gray uniforms, bolt throwers slung over their shoulders, marched through the streets and rode the ribbon escalators up and down. Hastily mustered civilians drilled in the open spaces They had no uniforms, and each man and woman was decked out in his or her own idea of what a fighting yeoman should wear. For the most part, the outfits, heavy on plumes and swirling capes, were hopelessly impractical for actual combat. The only things that identified them as an even marginally unified military force were the blue scarves they wore around their necks, the rifles and electroguns they carried, and the bandoliers; of spare bolts and power slugs across their chests. Someone in authority appeared to have taken it into his head to equip one section of the militia with bronze body armor and crested helmets. As far as Reave could tell, the armor was foil-thin and quite

useless for anything but ceremonial display.

'One whiff of a heat ray and that shit will burn on their backs.'

Reave continued to shake his head at each example of defensive preparation that they passed.

'This is worse than I imagined. These people don't have a clue. They're just playing at soldiers. Baptiste's going to walk all over them.'

The few small knots of hard-faced mercenaries they saw were a little more encouraging. Most sat cleaning their weapons and ignoring all attempts by officers of the militia to get them drilling or to indulge otherwise in the irrelevancies of military discipline. They, at least, seemed to grasp the seriousness of the threat they were facing, and they looked far from happy about it. Reave was also well aware that any number of them mightchange sides the moment the raiders reached the outer limits of the city.

A team of sweating epsilons struggled to manhandle some incredibly ancient energy cannon onto a peoplemover. Reave strolled over to it and, while the others waited, ran a hand over the discolored and pitted steel. 'The Draan could have made this. It ought to be in a museum.'

The militia captain in charge warned him off. 'Either help us push the sucker or get the hell away from it.'

Reave walked away. 'I'm glad I'm not going to be here when they fire that monster. It'll probably vaporize everything for a mile around.'

The one thing that remained uncertain was transportation. They had no solid plans for a means to get away from Krystaleit and on to whatever their next port of call might be. It was the subject of conversation as they crossed the city.

'I suppose there's no con that we can run that might get us the tank back,' Reave mused.

Billy shook his head. 'I've been thinking about it. I can't come up with anything that isn't going to draw attention to the fact that we've got contracts on us.'

Reave grimaced. 'I guess we have to play it by ear and hope we can hitch ourselves a ride.'

Renatta was hung over, and her previous euphoria was rapidly disintegrating. 'And what happens if we can't?'

Billy and Reave both looked at the Minstrel Boy, who stopped in his tracks and vehemently shook his head. 'Not a chance in hell. Don't even think about it.'

Billy and Reave were among the few who knew about the Minstrel Boy's lizardbrain implant and his ability to find his way though the nothings with more accuracy than routinely medicated humans and even to set courses for far-distant points of reality when treated with the right drugs. They also knew how much pain the effort

caused him.

The Minstrel Boy continued to shake his head. 'There is no way in the world that you are going to fill me up with cyclatrol and get me to lead you through the nothings.'

Renatta looked from one to the other of them. 'What's going on here? What's he getting so bent out of shape about?'

Reave gave her half a glance. 'Don't worry your pretty little head about it.'

Renatta snarled at him. 'Don't give me that shit. I want to know what's going on.'

Billy answered. 'The Minstrel Boy has an implant. If it came down to it, he could get us through the nothings.'

Renatta looked suspicious. 'I thought anyone could find their way through the nothings if they shot themselves full of enough cyclatrol.'

Billy shook his head. 'It's real hit-and-miss crazy even if you don't go mad first. I should know. I've tried it enough times.' He nodded at the Minstrel Boy. 'Him, he's different. He can really do it.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled. 'But I'm damned if I'm going to.'

Renatta faced the Minstrel Boy. 'What's your problem? Why won't you lead us through the nothings? You must have done it before.'

'Yeah, I've done it before. That's why I'm not going to do it again.'

'What's wrong with it?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at her coldly. 'You try it.'

'He's says it's traumatic.'

'Traumatic isn't the half of it. I don't think my sanity would take it.'

Reave temporarily put a stop to the conversation. 'Maybe the question won't arise.'

They reached the nearest of the tunnels that led to the exterior platforms and discovered that leaving the city would not be as simple as they had thought. The tunnel had been sealed and iron bulkheads had been swung into place like massive metal plugs. It would take a nukeling to move them, and even then the result would not be guaranteed. A sign informed them in the dour Gothic script of official Krystaleit that there were just two tunnels open to the platforms and the nothings and that even then, access both in and out was severely limited and subject to the approval of the defense forces.

Billy voiced everyone's misgiving.'This isn't looking good.'

Renatta looked frightened. 'Suppose they don't let us out?'

'Then I guess we stay. There's always a chance to desert once the actual fighting gets started.'

'That's hardly a consolation.'

The closest of the open tunnels was guarded by a squad ofmilitia, some in field gray and some in the fatuous bronze armor. There was

also one of the troopers, a tall, metallic figure in his arcane battle armor. No officers appeared to be around, and the four would-be deserters walked boldly through. They must have exhibited sufficient confidence for the militiamen to assume that they were on legitimate business. It was only when they were some yards into the tunnel, fingers crossed that their bluff would not be called, that the armored trooper slowly turned with soft shrieks of metal against metal and shouted after them in a deep, electronically enhanced bellow.

'You there! Halt! Stand where you are or lethal force will be used.'

The four of them stopped dead in their tracks. The metal figure crunched forward down the tunnel on steel boots.

'You have been scanned and identified by the Datron. You are under contract to the city. If you go any farther, I shall treat it as a breach meriting capital foreclosure.'

The DNA Cowboys and Renatta glumly turned and walked back toward Krystaleit and its war. Reave halted in front of the trooper.

'So what happens to us now?'

'I'll overlook this attempted breach if you immediately report to your units.'

The Minstrel Boy folded his arms. 'It's like I already told the bureaucrat, we don't have a unit. We were never assigned to one.'

'So you elected to leave the city?'

'Something like that.'

'If you don't have a unit, you should report to the Master of Free-Lancers.'

Reave nodded resignedly. 'Where do we find him?'

'A temporary headquarters for unattached contract warriors has been set up at the Victory Cafe'. You know where that is?'

Reave nodded. 'We know where that is.'

Billy shook his head as though he could not believe what he was hearing. 'A headquarters in a tavern?'

The armored trooper inclined his head slightly. The Minstrel Boy got the impression that he was smiling behind the blank mask of his helmet.

'It seems apt. Besides, the space was donated to the defense effort.'

The Victory Cafe, and indeed the whole of the Bluecat, had changed in the short time since Reave and the Minstrel Boy had been there. All but the most dogged of the prostitutes had left the plaza around the cat idol, and the streets had emptied of the usual pleasure seekers. Martial music had replaced the usual boom-boom from the clubs and gin joints. Armed patrols tramped the lanes and alleys on watch for possible fifth column attacks, and a long line of prospective purchasers waited outside Churchill's Weapons. Reave was certain that

he recognized some of the girls from the Rising Sun among them. All the people in the city were taking the threat of the raiders very seriously and were arming themselves rather than just relying on the organized militia to protect them. The Minstrel Boy noticed that, unlike a lot of places, the soothbooth he had visited after the munchkin attack was still open for business, although it did not have any customers. As they passed by, Reave nudged him in the ribs.

'If she was so smart, how come she didn't see all this coming?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. 'Maybe she knows something that we don't know.'

'You really think so?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'No, not really.'

Armed men and women lounged around the entrance of the Victory Cafe. A few looked up as Renatta and the DNA Cowboys approached, but nobody challenged their right to be there. The interior of the saloon was crowded. Hard-faced men and women with cold eyes that were constantly on the move had every imaginable type of weapon hanging from belts and shoulder harnesses or stacked within easy reach. They were waiting for something to happen with the patience and economy of energy of experienced fighters. Reave would never have imagined that there were quite so many or such a variety of mercenaries and freebooters in the city. Neoprimitives leaned on their power spears and watched the comings and goings with unfathomable eyes. Others needed more solid diversions. Bandidos from the section, with oiled hair and drooping mustaches, compared weapons and bragged about past campaigns and conquests that probably had never happened, or at least not the way they were telling it. A knot of nomad yahoos, a long way from their normal stomping grounds in the Lanfranc Margins, were down on their knees shooting the bones, seven come eleven. Four farii sat on the edge of the deserted stage silently sharing a pipe. A half dozen Nulites with their veils in place were seated around a single table, fingering their prayer cylinders, while everyone else gave them a wide berth. The bar was closed, but there were bottles being passed around, and the air was filled with noise and smoke and a certain strange controlled anticipation. Reave knew from experience that if the waiting went on too long, fights would start breaking out among the defenders as the strain started to tell. A bunch like that would quickly become impossible to control.

There were a number of familiar faces among the mob in the Victory Cafe. One of the first the Minstrel Boy spotted was that of Clay Blaisdell. He was drinking whiskey with a group of cronies, and he was already close to staggering drunk. He spotted the DNA Cowboys at the same lime they spotted him.

'No shit, will you look who's here! The DNA Cowboys have come to save us all. I would have thought that you guys would have been long gone to the nothings by now.'

The Minstrel Boy, who was already pissed off enough at being stuck inside Krystaleit, stalked up to Blaisdell with dark anger flashing in his eyes. His voice was quiet and dangerous. 'You want to say that again, Clay?'

Clay Blaisdell laughed. 'Hell, no. I don't want to say that again. I wouldn't be here myself if the tunnels hadn't been sealed.'

Billy and Reave had come up behind the Minstrel Boy, who was thinking about how good it might feel to take out his frustration on the swaying Blaisdell. He still had not forgotten the needling that the other had put him through the last time he had been in the Victory Cafe.

Blaisdell was saved by a commotion over by the stage. Two militia officers and a short thickset man in a buffalo jacket and high, buckled boots had climbed up and were shouting for quiet.

'Okay, okay, let's all settle down. Shut up and listen up. My name is Reft Zill, and I've been put in charge of deploying this rabble. I'm your Master of Free-Lancers, and you follow my orders until somebody tells you otherwise.'

Reave let out a groan. 'I don't believe it.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced around. 'What's the problem?'

Reave pointed to the stage. 'That little fat bastard, that's the problem. Reft Zill is an overweight blowhard who shouldn't to put in command of a kids' picnic.'

Reave was not the only one complaining. There were boos and shouts and catcalls from all over the room, but Zill homed straight in on Reave.

'You got some objection to my command, Reave Mekonta?'

Suddenly Reave was the center of attention. Fully aware of that fact, he took his time answering. He allowed his face to split slowly into a wide, shit-eating grin. 'Hell, no, Reft, everything else around here is fucked up. Why should this be any different?'

There was a general roar of laughter.

Zill had small, resentful piggy eyes, which regarded the room with something close to loathing. 'You may all think that you're hotshots, but as far as I'm concerned you're nothing more than a flea-bitten rabble.'

'You can call us scum, Reft,' Reave retorted, 'but there are a few of us here who remember you at Menute Falls and your noble advance to the rear.'

There was more laughter. Zill became red in the face.

'Make the most of it, Reave Mekonta. Have your fun and get it

over with. After this, I'm quite prepared to hang you if you get in my way.'

Reave did not respond to the threat, but others did. Shouts of 'Oh, yeah?' and 'Just try it!' clearly indicated that Zill's command was not going to be an easy one. Everyone in the room knew that despite Zill's bluster, a force of mercenaries like this had to be handled with kid gloves. They would fight like maniacs, but if authority pushed them too hard, they would simply up and mutiny. The rancor went on for a while longer, but bit by bit things settled down, and eventually they were all paying attention as Zill outlined how they would be used in the defense of the city. Everyone in the room also knew that their collective back was against the wall and that it was no time to be screwing around, even if they disliked the setup.

The plan was anything but deep. Hampered by the fact that nobody would know from which direction the raiders' attack might come until they actually emerged from the nothings, the mercenaries would play a flexible, mobile role. They would be held in first-line reserve, ready to reinforce the militia and the volunteers wherever necessary. That at least met with the room'sapproval. Any merc worth his or her salt bitterly resented being used as cannon fodder. They were specialists and expected to be treated as such. The citizens of Krystaleit could break the first fury of the raiders' assault with their own bodies.

Zill finally wound up his address by taking questions from the crowd. Billy Oblivion was one of the first to raise his hand. When Zill pointed to him, he did not mince words. He had as much cause to dislike Reft Zill as Reave did: He had also been at the fight at Menute Falls.

'If we're going to be so damn mobile, can we get our tank back?'

'What tank?'

'My partners and I arrived in an old Saab battlewagon. The city impounded it for the duration of our stay. It had a full weapons system, including a heat ray, and it would seem like a good idea if we got it back.'

Zill held a whispered conversation with the two militia officers. After a few seconds he turned back to Billy.

'The vehicle has already been requisitioned. It's deployed in another part of the city.'

'Is that legal?'

'Practically anything's legal under the state of emergency.'

'What about our heavy weapons? They were in the tank. I don't intend to go into combat with just a needler.'

Zill again consulted with the militia officers.

'The weapons from the vehicle have already been distributed. If

you go to the militia armory, you will be issued bolt throwers.'

Billy was outraged. 'What am I supposed to do with a bolt thrower, goddamn it? I'm a technician. I work with sophisticated weapons. Bolt throwers are for bozos.'

'So go round to Churchill's and get what you want.'

'Will the city pay for it?'

Zill wearily glanced at one of the militiamen. The officer nodded. 'Yes, you can obtain suitable weapons on city credit.'

The Minstrel Boy turned and looked at Reave to see how he was reacting. Reave was quiet and thoughtful, in total contrast to his previous mood. The Minstrel Boy did not know that Reave had spotted another familiar face in the crowd. Menlo Welker was over in the shadows at the back of the bar. They had seen each other and exchanged brief, covert nods. The presence of Menlo in the Victory Cafe was a warning that when the attack came, any number of the mercs in the room could turn on the others, attacking them from behind in a deadly surprise as the raiders came over the barricades. Reave could only hope that old times would prevail upon Menlo to tip him before the fifth column attacked.

The days that followed the excitement of the alert and the mobilization sank into a lull of anticlimactic waiting. Billy, the Minstrel Boy, and Renatta went to Churchill's and, after jumping the line with a display of swaggering, overbearing macho, selected weapons. Billy came out with a huge nine-function Questar multiplex, remarking that if he had to go into combat, he might as well have the most radical edge possible. Renatta picked out a pair of Doh-Bien wrist lasers in black steel with silver inlay. As they were walking back to the Victory Cafe, the Minstrel Boy questioned her choice.

'You know those things need weeks of practice before you stop being as much a menace to yourself as to the enemy?'

Renatta looked at him as though he were a total idiot and flexed her hands like a Balinese dancer.'You think I don't know how to play wrist lasers? You think I don't know anything?'

'Sometimes I wonder what you do know.'

'Well, pardon me for not being properly menued.'

The Minstrel Boy, after a lot of thought, had opted for a reproduction AK 5000 that had been converted to fire x-pando slugs in ultrarapid bursts. It was the model with the wooden stock, drum clip, and retractable twelve-inch bayonet. The way things were shaping up, the bayonet might prove useful.

The weapons were the last real diversion. They had spent a day practicing with them out by the nothings, but after that there was little to do but settle in and wait. The mercenaries were billeted in commandeered rooms in the Bluecat as close as possible to the Victory

Cafe. Although Zill constantly attempted to create makework for the men and women under his command, the bulk of the waiting time was spent getting drunk, fighting, and engaging in last-ditch sexual encounters. Zill had, at least, managed to organize the fights into staged competitions rather than freestyle brawls. Reave and a giant yahoo called Gorshon Mass Goh held the house record for gambling receipts after a vicious fifteen rounds of contact wandweking, but by far the most memorable and crowd-pleasing bout was the no-limit, feral-feline hair-tearing confrontation between Su Wu Lu and Brawny Helda. That bout started some related but rather different confrontations. The sexual undertow was never below a dull roar, and the constant couplings and partings had a desperate quality that Billy had summed up the most aptly: 'We who are about to die tend to get horny.'

Although she still behaved like part of the team, Renatta had transferred her after-hours affections from the DNA Cowboys altogether, first to Goshon Mass Goh after he had narrowly beaten Reave at the wandweking and then to, of all people, Clay Blaisdell. After that Billy, Reave, and the Minstrel Boy felt more than entitled to pass the bottle and call her a whore when she was not around.

Tired of puzzling over Renatta's methods of operating, the Minstrel Boy had taken up with an exotic dancer called Mai Last Tango; in fact, she was stark naked and vigorously straddling his hips when the sirens sounded.

As they echoed eerily through the instantly silent city, the Minstrel Boy eased away from her. He was suddenly very frightened.

'The enemy's been detected. The bad guys are almost here.'

> *The bizarre attitudes toward death that were so in evidence during the Damaged Era all had their roots in the practice of template reproduction. At the most simple level it completely negated the normal process of bereavement. All too frequently, if an individual was accidentally killed or otherwise died before his time and had already been templated, friends, lovers, and loved ones would commission a reproduction and life would go on as before. It was not uncommon for a number of improvements to be made to the reproduction, making it more attractive or possibly more tractable than the original. There is a strong*

possibility that many of the characters in the legends may have died many times only to be duplicated by admirers, colleagues, or political allies. It was this treatment of the dead mat gave rise to the saying 'Life is other people.'

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Thirty minutes to estimated contact,' the voice from the PA announced.

The waiting had peaked. Along with five other mercenaries, Billy, Reave, the Minstrel Boy, and Renatta crouched in the H-quadrant access tunnel that led out to the nothings. In front of them, out on the open platform, the first-line defenders, militia and civilian volunteers alike, stood to in the shelter of hastily erected fortifications. Although the big stasis field that surrounded the raiders was being clearly and continuously tracked and plotted by the central biomass, there was still no clue as to where on the Krystaleit perimeter the first blow would fall. As the raiders had drawn nearer, other questions had been raised. The most pressing was what would happen when the large and powerful reality of the raiders actually touched and then merged with the city's bigger and even more powerful field. For some hours strange things had been happening. Certain kinds of electronic hardware had ceased to function for no detectable reason, domestic pets had started to show signs of extreme agitation, a large number of lights had simply winked out, and a power substation had spontaneously combusted. Now the nothings had started to flash with white fire as though the nonmatter were being overcharged with some form of alien nonenergy. The defenders and fortifications around the edges of the external platforms were thrown into stark, flickering silhouette, and an irrational terror of the unknown was laid on top of the very real fear of the enemy. Some groups of Krystaleit's philosophers were making dire predictions, and the word 'cataclysm' kept being tossed about. To make matters worse, Billy had started to hear muffled, indistinct voices inside his head. He did not know if that phenomenon was a brand-new symptom of stress orwhether it was a result of the physical conditions that were growing more weird by the minute.

'I wish to hell they'd get here — anything's got to be better than this,' he complained.

'Twenty minutes to estimated contact.'

The Minstrel Boy checked the AK 5000 for what had to be at least the twenty-eighth time since they had been deployed in the tunnel.

'What's the betting that they hit right in front of us?'

'The way our luck's been running?'

Renatta was unconsciously chewing on her lower lip. The Minstrel Boy had to admit that despite the way he had been bad-mouthing her over the last few days, she was standing up very well for someone who had never faced combat before. She sighed and flexed her wrists, easing the weight of the laser bracelets.

'This has got to be the worst.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded toward the nothings, where patches of the nonmatter fog had become an incandescent white. 'That's the worst. You could really believe that it was the end of the world.'

Reave, who was nearest to the mouth of the tunnel, glanced back. 'Will you all keep that down? You'll end up shooting each other.' He had dropped naturally into the role of squad leader.

The space became eerily bright as the section of the nothings they could see at the end of the tunnel pulsed blinding white and then faded slightly again.

'You think this is them?'

'If it is, they're early.'

The voices in Billy's head were louder, but he still could not make out what they were saying. 'I don't like this at all.'

'I told you to put a cover on the negative comments.'

The very next moment not even Reave could hold back a gasp of amazement.

'Holy shit!'

Pseudopods of brilliant purple plasma danced out of the nothings and played over defenders and defenses. They seemed particularly drawn to metal. A militiaman cut and ran in panic as the glowing plasma coursed over his bronze armor. He was trying to brush it off with his hands as though he were on fire.

As far as Reave could see, the plasma did not seem to be doing him any actual harm. His sobbing terror was purely a result of the man psyching himself out.

'Everyone sit tight. I think that stuffs harmless.'

In fact, he was certain that it was harmless. It looked exactly like the glowing purple energy he had seen attach itself to the Old Metal Monster inside the ziggurat just before he had deserted from Baptiste's raiders.

The plasma was inside the tunnel, scooting toward them along the floor, walls, and ceiling. It shimmered over their weapons and even the metal fittings on their clothes. Everyone stiffened at its touch, but once they all found that it did not seem to be doing them any damage, they were able to relax slightly; still, none of them seemed to be exactly happy about having bright, cold witchfire dancing on their guns and belt buckles.

'Fifteen minutes to estimated contact.'

The plasma vanished as quickly as it had appeared: It just retreated into the nothings and was gone. Reave wiped the sweat off his face. He did not want to let the others see it, but the waiting and the uncanny special effects were also getting to him.

There was a rumble of thunder from back inside. Everyone

stiffened, and heads whipped around. Had the enemy hit on the other side of the spherical city? Back down the tunnel sheets of static were arcing between the buildings. They flashed brightly, and there was another loud clap.

'Okay, okay, it's just an electrical storm inside the city.'

A mercenary called Rat Barstow, whom Reave did not particularly trust and did not particularly want in his squad, was staring back down the tunnel with wide, scared eyes. 'There are never electrical storms inside the city.'

Reave scowled. 'Well, there are now.'

'You think the enemy is doing this to soften us up?'

'Seems like it's working on you.'

Renatta looked at him sharply. 'You do think they're doing it?'

Reave angrily shook his head. 'No, I don't. They don't have the technology. It think it's what happens when two big stasis fields come together.'

'Ten minutes to estimated contact.'

There was something disturbing about the calm of the vaguely feminine electronic voice that was running off the countdown. Reave glanced back at the squad again.

'No more talking from now on. That means everyone.'

Something new was happening. The nothings had started to dim. They were also changing color. From bright white, they faded to a diffused pearly pink that in turn darkened to a deep magenta. Thunder and lightning crashed and boomed inside the city. And then the nothings started to clear. It was like a hole appearing. A vast abyss of empty, clear-air reality was materializing in the nothings.

'This is it! Be ready.'

The voice from the PA spoke for the last time. 'Contact has been made.'

The lightning stopped, and the thunder ceased to roll. In moments it was clear that the abyss was not empty. It had a floor of plain red ocher, basic rock matter that stretched back as far as the eye could see, and on that floor an army was starting to move.

Barstow let out a low whistle. 'Goddamn it to hell, there are thousands of them, and they're coming right at us.'

Above the army there was a bloodred pseudosun that made the parting of the nothings resemble a grim satanic dawn.

Reave nodded. 'It's going to be a long day.'

Billy Oblivion's face twisted in a lopsided grin. 'Let's hope we see the end of it.'

Reave had expected the enemy to be all over them the moment the nothings opened. Instead, whatever combination of warlords that was in command of the army had made their men stand back, leaving

maybe a thousand yards of dusty no-man's-land between attackers and defenders, putting them beyond the effective range of the majority of the city's weapons. It was a strange, almost formal move. The initial wave of attackers would have to advance into a hail of concentrated fire. If Reave had been running things, he would never have played it that way, but he guessed that there was no accounting for the insane. The warlords seemed more concerned with grand martial spectacle than with casualty figures. Neoprimitive impis were the first line of assault, a dark mass crested by a sea of waving powerspears, spread out over a broad front. They had no long-range weapons, and very soon they would move forward at that inhuman highspeed run. Possibly, Reave reflected, one of the warlords did not feel too assured of their savage loyalty and wanted to see their numbers thinned out a bit.

Men were coming down the tunnel from inside the city. Reave turned in alarm. His first reaction was that it was a fifth column attack, but it turned out to be nothing more than squads of militia moving over from the quadrants that would not be taking the brunt of the first attack. Reave doubted that the raiders who were already inside the city would make a move until that first shock wave of neoprimitives had dashed itself on the defenses. The neoprimitives were notorious for their very imprecise concepts of friend and foe.

The noise was the first thing to hit: the amplified crash of steel drums, the braying of horns, and the deep-throated, cooing war cry of the neoprimitives. The last grew into a great roar as the impis began to move forward, slowly at first but rapidly gathering speed. The two flanks spread out, curving forward at the extreme ends in the traditional buffalo horn formation, while the center, the head, was compressed into a solid unstoppable mass. All along the barricades on the rim platform, officers were shouting for their troops to hold their fire until the attackers were well within range.

The thousand yards was cut to five hundred, then four, and then three. A mortar shell burst in the air above the leading edge of the assault, and the battle was on. A particle cannon opened up, scything through the impis' front line. At 250 yards, the orders were given and firing began in earnest. A withering blanket of small-arms fire smashed into the howling press of neoprimitives, but they were barely slowed down. They continued to run like roaring maniacs, leaving their dead sprawled in the red dust. With the gap between the opposing forces narrowed to just two hundred yards, the impis received a little help. Three red biplanes rose from somewhere in the rear of the army and buzzed toward the platform fortifications. They made a wide, high turn, staying out of reach of the defenders' fire, and then made a low, fast strafing run, hitting the lines of defenders with

cannon fire and small airlite rockets. The crew on the particle cannon struggled to elevate their weapon and managed to loose a burst at the last of the planes as it roared back the way it had come. They must have hit something. The plane did not go down, but it started trailing smoke. A ragged cheer went up from the barricades.

The celebration was short-lived, however. It took what was left of the impis just eight seconds to cover the last hundred yards. They hit the platform like breaking surf, and the defenders were engulfed in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. The spears stabbed and stabbed. The neoprimitives were masters at such brutal, close-quarters combat. As more and more of them poured over the fortifications, the volunteers and the militia were increasingly forced to give ground.

The line broke in front of the tunnel, and a dozen or more of the attackers burst through before the gap could be plugged. It was Reave's first look at the enemy. The neoprimitives were tall, olive-skinned men with highspike hair, feathered kilts, and scarlet battle paint; their powerspears hummed loudly as they raced for the mouth of the tunnel. Reave leveled his pistols and screamed the order.

'Fire!'

The crash of weapons was like a psychic release for the DNA Cowboys. Whatever happened from then on, there would be no more waiting. Billy's multiplex alone took three of the neoprimitives in the first burst. Only two of the dozen actually made it to the tunnel's mouth. One of them was felled by a two-armed sweep of Renatta's lasers, while a second was brought down by a short x-pando burst from the Minstrel Boy's AK. As he fired, he noted that Renatta was exceedingly good with the wrist lasers and wondered where and in what circumstances she had learned the complicated art.

In the wake of the neoprimitives, the rest of the enemy army was moving forward. The most immediate threat was the squadron of lizard riders that was kicking up a dust cloud across the rock surface, charging hard down on the platforms. A particle cannon fired a long barrage, and a cluster of riders came down in a tangle of thrashing legs. By far the majority of the defenders, however, were still engaged with the neoprimitives, fighting for their lives. They had no time to bring their weapons to bear to slow the charge. Reave spotted running figures in among the high-tailed, high-stepping lizards, awkward angular things, too tall to be human. They had to be the green template monsters created by the one who called himself Max Zero.

He glanced back at the Minstrel Boy. 'They can't hold much longer. When those lizard soldiers hit, the front lines are going to be overrun.'

'So what do we do? Move up and reinforce? The idea doesn't thrill me.'

'Me, neither. I intend to try and get us out of this alive and one way is to do the minimum that won't get us shot as deserters.'

'So?'

'So when the lizards hit, we fall back to the second position. Be ready.'

'Just give the word, I'm always ready to retreat.'

A bomb went off somewhere inside the city.

'Nulites?' the Minstrel Boy wondered.

Reave shook his head. 'I doubt it. Not unless they're working for the enemy.'

Two militiamen in bronze armor fled from the fortifications with five neoprimitives in hot pursuit. A pair of powerspears were thrown as one, and the fancy armor offered no protection. One blade stood out a good twelve inches in front of the first man's chest, and the look of horror on his face as it continued to hum at pain vibration inside him was something that Reave did not think he would be able to forget for a long time.

The first lizard came over the barricades. Its rider wore black samurai-style armor and wielded a pair of long pistols similar to Reave's. He seemed to be in the throes of a suicidal frenzy, wheeling his mount from side to side and firing into the fighting pack around the fortifications. He shot four defenders before he was dragged from his saddle by their comrades to be hacked and beaten to death.

Reave gestured to his squad. 'Okay, fall back. Fall back to the second position.'

The squad needed no further urging. They ran back down the tunnel, away from the fighting. Barstow and another merc called Natch were the first out into the open, and they were immediately cut down by a burst of fire from a nearby walkway. The others stopped dead in their tracks.

The Minstrel Boy looked around anxiously. 'Now what?'

Reave edged up to the mouth of the tunnel and peered around the stonework. The wall beside him was spattered by more fire. He quickly pulled his head back. 'There's a bunch of fifth columnists. They've set up a fire point by the big support pillar over on the left.'

At that moment two lizard soldiers clattered into the other end of the tunnel. The Minstrel Boy dropped into a crouch, the AK chattering in his hand.

Reave gestured to the three remaining mercs. 'Shaef, Nosmo, Stazio, back him up!' He turned to Billy. 'Can you fix that fire point?'

Bill was already jacking a small cigar-sized smartbomb into the multiplex's launcher. 'If my aura holds.' The weird voices in his head had stopped once the shooting had begun.

Reave scowled. 'Don't get mystic on me.'

Two lizards were twitching on the floor of the tunnel. One of the riders had staggered to his feet, determined to keep coming on foot. He took only four paces before Nosmo blew his head off. No more lizards came into the tunnel. For the moment the militia seemed to be holding the line. Billy craned around the corner of the tunnel mouth, and it was once again blasted with fire. Holding the multiplex at arm's length, he loosed the missile. For Billy, a firefight was the easy part. There was a *crump* as the missile impacted. Flicking the multiplex to heat ray, he very cautiously stepped into the open. To his immense relief, nobody shot at him.

'Okay, the way's clear. Let's go!'

They sprinted for the cover of the big support pillar and took stock of the situation. The smoke of the explosion still lingered, and the broken bodies of a half dozen fifth columnists were scattered all around the base of the pillar. Reave looked at Billy as he turned one over with his foot. Half the man's face had been blown away.

'You really did a job on these guys.'

'What was I supposed to do, slap them on the wrist?'

There was no sign of any other enemy units, and they started moving toward their first fallback position. Other squads of militia were being moved up to the platforms. For the moment the first line seemed to be holding, although Reave did not want to think about the cost. A few officers gave them strange looks as Reave's squad retreated when everyone else was advancing, but once again a look of self-assurance stood them in good stead, and nobody stopped to question them. Their fallback point was up one level, in a sandbagged fire position set up on the steps of the city's central registry building. It afforded an elevated view of the access roads leading to the platform tunnels. Themoment the first line gave way, they would find themselves in the thick of the fighting.

When they arrived there, they found that the position was already manned by a team of skittish civilian volunteers under the command of a regular militia officer, who only just managed to stop his men from shooting Reave's squad as fifth columnists. The arrival of Reave and his people seemed to add to an already confused situation. The officer paced up and down, shaking his head, while his men looked ready to jump at their own shadows.

'I don't understand why you were sent back here. Half the brigade's been moved forward to the platforms.'

Reave just shrugged, relying totally on the military's God-given talent for fouling up.

'Hell, I don't know. I just follow orders, I don't cut them. All I know is that we were in the tunnels, up to our ass in fifth columnists and neoprimitives, and then a runner comes and tells us that we're to

fall back to our second position. I wasn't about to complain. It's only a matter of time before the platforms are overrun.'

The officer decided to get a second opinion. The fire position had one of the Krystaleit militia's cumbersome communication sets. In the Damaged World, where no signal could penetrate the nothings and even stabilized reality was awash with energy fog, electronic communication was something of a dying art.

The officer looked at the volunteer operator. 'Are you getting anything on that?'

The operator shook his head. 'Not a damned thing. The whole net seems to be down.'

The officer cursed under his breath and faced Reave. 'I don't know what to tell you.'

There was a series of explosions out on the platforms, and the volunteers looked nervously at each other.

Reave checked the charges on his pistols. 'I figure that at any minute, the question of where we're supposed to be at is going to be pretty damned academic.'

Almost on cue, groups of figures started coming up the access road. First it was medics carrying stretchers and the walking wounded helping each other up the ramp, looking for a secure spot where they could get medical attention. Initially, the retreat was fairly dignified. Clearly, the defenders on the barricades were desperately buying time so the wounded could get out, butin a situation like that time had a nasty habit of running out all too quickly. In a matter of minutes large numbers of defenders were streaming out of the tunnels and back into the city. Some tried to fight an orderly rearguard action, falling back from one position of cover to another, firing back into the tunnels as they withdrew. Others, however, were simply fleeing for their lives in an unseemly rout, even abandoning their weapons in panic as they sought the apparent safety of the interior of the city.

A militiaman was caught in the periphery of a heat blast, and his armor blazed like a Roman candle. Amazingly, he was not killed outright but staggered forward for a few steps, screaming, with his armor streaming green and yellow flames. Reave's face was grim. The moment he had first seen that armor he had known it was no good. Whoever had issued the damn stuff deserved to be taken out and shot.

The first attackers came out of the tunnels, a howling knot of neoprimitives with blood up to their elbows, plus a handful of the green template monsters. It was Reave's first look at the things. Menlo had not exaggerated. They were ugly as sin. Long, purposeless, saberlike fangs extended down from their upper jaws, and the thick, horny claws at the ends of their fingers must have seriously impaired the use of their hands. They were more the product of some fevered

nightmare fantasy than custom-tailored fighting machines. It appeared that the only weapons the monsters were capable of using were wide-bladed scimitars and rudimentary slug guns. They did not even move well. They were ungainly and uncoordinated, and they seemed too stupid to avoid exposing themselves as clear, easy targets. A platoon of militiamen formed ranks across the road and loosed volleys of bolts into the raiders emerging from the tunnels. There was even something weird about the way the template monsters died. When they were hit, they first spasmed crazily as though some elementary electrical nervous system was shorting out, and then they collapsed in on themselves like soft containers that suddenly had been drained of their contents.

While the only attackers were the neoprimitives and the green monsters, the platoon on the access road held its own. Then the mounted men started to come out of the tunnels. As Reave knew all too well, they were the real strength of Baptiste and the other warlords. With their speed, firepower, and mobility, they would be more than a match for anything Krystaleit could put up against them.

A squadron of lizard soldiers wheeled out of the tunnels and thundered down on the hapless militia platoon. The militiamen stood their ground to the last moment and even took out three of the riders with their final volley of bolts; then the lizards were in among them, and they were scattered and gone. That was all she wrote. A formation of lancers mounted on tall black horses galloped out of the tunnel but clattered off in another direction.

The Minstrel Boy was up beside Reave with an anxious look on his face. 'This post is going to be a major hot spot in a matter of minutes.'

'Don't I know it.'

Already the volunteers were exchanging fire with the lizard soldiers. For the moment the enemy advance had been halted at the foot of the ramp that led to the upper level. The fire post commanded a clear sweep of the ramp. Once again, though, it was only a matter of time. More and more enemy troops were pouring out of the tunnels, and very soon they would have sufficient strength to rush the ramp. They might not make it on the first try, but by the third or fourth the defenders would be all out of both resolve and ammunition. Either that or the attackers could bring up a particle cannon or some other heavy ordnance, and then it would be over very much fester.

Billy joined the conversation. 'So how do we get out of this mess?'

'All we can do is wait for a chance.'

'If we don't get a chance pretty soon, we won't get no chance at all. I can feel the fat lady getting ready to sing.'

A hail of fire ripped along the top of the sandbag emplacement,

and everyone ducked. A volunteer who had overheard a good part of the DNA Cowboys' conversation looked at them in dumb horror. Reave had no time, however, to worry about morale.

'Goddamn it! They're bringing up something heavy.'

The line of lizards at the foot of the ramp had parted to allow passage for a team of foot soldiers hauling a squat metal cylinder on a wheeled mount.

'What the hell is that thing?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'I've never seen anythinglike it, but it looks like it's quite capable of trashing this little redoubt.'

Reave, in no way bothered that he was usurping the militia officer's authority, yelled to the force of volunteers.'Everybody concentrate fire on that cylinder thing. Make it as hard as possible for them to set it up.'

The enemy seemed to have other ideas. With the neoprimitives and green giants in the front, a grimly determined charge started up the ramp. It had no hope of success, but it drew fire away from the cylinder weapon. One of Billy's tiny smartbombs killed the gun crew plus two lizards and their riders, but it did not seem to harm the weapon, and others immediately moved in to replace the crew.

Reave turned on the militia officer. 'Maybe we should think about pulling out. There's no way we can stop them bringing that thing to bear.'

The officer glared at him. In the background there was the sound of firefights from all over the nearby parts of the city.

'You mercenaries are very good at retreating.'

'There are times when it's a lot smarter than standing around and waiting to be killed.'

The officer's face reddened, and his jaw jutted. 'We're going to stand here and fight, you understand me, mister?'

Reave shrugged. 'It's suicide, but whatever you say.'

The officer's rage and frustration suddenly exploded. 'I said, do you understand me, mister?'

'I understand you,' Reave snarled back at the officer. 'I also understand you've got your tin soldier head up your ass.'

For about five seconds it looked as though the officer was going to shoot Reave out of hand. Then he must have realized that if he did that, Billy and the Minstrel Boy would undoubtedly waste him in return. Self-preservation won out over anger. He turned and directed his anger at his men.

'Keep firing at that damned cylinder.'

Billy crawled up behind Reave. 'We should waste that sucker.'

Reave shook his head. 'Just be ready to get out of here when I give the signal. Tell Renatta and the Minstrel Boy.'

There was a shriek like a compacted hurricane, and half the fire post was instantly vaporized. Billy, Reave, and the Minstrel Boy were all alive, if dazed, amid the rubble. Renatta had beenthrown out of the trench but was already up and crawling for cover. The officer and most of the volunteers were gone. Nosmo and Shaef were also dead.

'That thing's a molecular blaster. I didn't know there were any left.'

'I can't hear you. I've gone deaf.'

Reave was up on his feet. 'Let's go, go, go! Inside the registry building. Move it!'

A full-scale charge was coming up the ramp. Renatta and the DNA Cowboys raced up the steps, followed by the handful of survivors from the fire post, running for the shelter of the central registry building as beams and bullets smashed into the stonework under their feet. Just outside the door Billy fell, but he had only tripped. The Minstrel Boy grabbed him and dragged him inside.

'Are you okay?'

Billy nodded as glass from the door crashed around them. 'Yeah, yeah, which way do we go?'

'We'll make for the basements. There have got to be tunnels down there that'll take us down to other levels. We've got to try and avoid as much of the fighting as possible and make our way to the open nothings.'

The fighting was closing on the heart of the city. For the next half hour the four of them made their way through scenes of slaughter, skirting the worst combat zones and heading as best they could for the outside quadrants, as far as possible from the focus of the attack. Despite their efforts, though, they could not completely go around the violence that was gripping more and more of the city as the raiders pressed home their attack with alarming speed. The defenders of Krystaleit appeared to have just one desperate strategy: They held their forces at key points until the pressure became too great and the casualties too numerous, and then they fell back deeper into the city. All the while they drew closer the hub of the city, the vital center of the great sphere, the energy core, the primary stasis generator and the huge integrated biomass. They knew that the raiders would take no prisoners and that there could be no surrender.

The defenders were constantly hampered by the large numbers of refugees who were being driven back by the kill-crazy raiders. Sections of the city that were in enemy hands were already burning. The raiders were routinely torching buildings,sometimes with defenders or unarmed citizens still inside them. If they intended taking the city as a prize, they seemed perversely intent on leaving themselves little more than a blackened ruin.

In some ways the second wave of the raiders was the worst. They seemed quite prepared to start the looting, raping, and general mindless destruction even before the city as a whole had fallen. The darkened streets were filled with their whooping and yelling, the screams of their victims, and the constant discharge of weapons. The DNA Cowboys were forced to mingle with the bestial mob, doing their best to look like raiders themselves, using the cover of the smoke and moving down streets where dark figures indulged themselves in nameless brutalities against a background of garish flames.

For the first time the Minstrel Boy observed Renatta registering real shock and horror. She looked around at him with eyes that were wide with revulsion. 'It's like a scene out of hell.'

'I think I'd rather choose hell.'

Reave and Billy were a little farther ahead. A smoke-blackened rider with a patch over his left eye grabbed Reave by the arm. The man was on the end of a line of raiders waiting their turn with two unfortunate, terrified women who had been stripped and bound, back to back, against a pillar. Reave's instant reaction was that he had been discovered. He had to stop himself from whipping out a pistol when, a moment later, he discovered that the seeming attack was just an invitation to the party

'You want to join in the fun, asshole?'

Reave, nerves still jangling, quickly shook his head and walked on. 'I got orders.'

The rider's voice boomed after him. 'Fucking snob! You gotta be one of Baptiste's queers!'

Reave gave a slight shake of his head. The bastard did not know how close he was to the truth.

Renatta hissed at the Minstrel Boy. 'Isn't there anything that we can do about this?'

The Minstrel Boy scowled. 'Yeah, we can die trying. Just keep moving. There aren't that many women in this army, and you kind of stand out.'

They started to cross the Laurel Bridge, which spanned the Elitespace and the Elgin hanging gardens. Hallway across, theyhad to press back against the guardrails as a troop of lancers trotted across, driving a dozen frightened women and four young boys in front of them, goading them on with the sharp tips of their lances. Several levels below, a line of four vehicles with a large escort of lizard riders and horsemen was driving slowly up the broad expanse of Khedive Boulevard. Reave recognized the armored car that was second in line.

'That's Bapiste down there.'

'How do you know?'

'I know his car. I figure Protexus, Taraquin, and Zero are in the

other vehicles.'

'So the warlords have entered the city.'

'The end can't be long now.'

Billy caressed the multiplex and looked down, judging the range. 'I've still got half a clip of smartbombs left. We could finish this right here and now.'

Reave also looked down. 'We'd never get out alive.'

'I could take them all out at once.'

Reave regretfully shook his head. 'The army would destroy the city anyway.'

Billy put away the smartbombs.

They were approaching the front lines, and there appeared to be no way to their destination without passing through the fighting. Then the Minstrel Boy had an idea.

'You figure the sewers and conduits are still open?'

Billy nodded. 'It's worth a shot. This fighting's been pretty simplistic up to now, all blood and dash. It's possible that they haven't considered the sewers.'

'So we go through the sewers like Harry Lime?' Renatta asked.

The three of them stared at her.

'Who's Harry Lime?'

She shrugged. 'It doesn't matter.'

As Billy had predicted, nobody had considered the sewers. The only things there were the rats and the marls. Almost bent double, they made their way through the semidarkness. The sewers in Krystaleit ran through the actual thickness of the various city levels, and they could tell when they were passing under the shifting combat zones by the impact vibrations that shuddered through the stone and concrete. At one point they halted as a major explosion shook cascades of dirt and dust from the roof of the tunnel.

'I feel like a goddamn mole.'

'Better a goddamn mole than a dead hero.'

The impact vibrations began to decrease, and it seemed that they were actually behind the lines of the defenders.

'I think we should try the surface again.'

They crawled on until they reached a vertical shaft that ran up to a manhole. Reave took the point, climbing the iron rungs that were set in the wall of the shaft and hoping first that the cover would not be locked down and second that it would not open up on a new firefight.

He put his shoulder under the heavy cast-iron cover and pushed up. At first it stuck, but as he applied more pressure it slowly lifted. The first thing he saw was three pairs of solid military-style boots standing around the hole. As he pushed the cover back farther, he found that he was looking into the muzzles of three weapons. For a

gut-wrenching moment he thought they had come up on the wrong side of the line. Then he saw the militia uniforms behind the guns.

'Don't shoot! Don't shoot! We're on your side.'

One by one they climbed out of the manhole under the watchful eye of three very nervous militiamen. They seemed to have emerged into a hastily established command area right in the shadow of the core. The sound of heavy fighting was very close, and the troops that were moving around had the grim if hopeless determination of men who were preparing for a last stand in which they had only the most remote chance of prevailing. There was no attempt to disguise the fact that the preparations being made were for selling their lives at the highest possible price. The last of the heavy ordnance was being ranged along a tight perimeter. A half dozen of the heavily armored troopers stood waiting to be deployed in the final last-ditch effort. Close by, a team of technicians were setting up a complicated communcations unit, while groups of officers clustered around looking worriedly at maps and three-dimensional biode displays. The overall atmosphere was one of single-minded concentration on the tasks at hand. Nobody wanted to think about the future when only a miracle would allow them to live to see it. The DNA Cowboys were left in no doubt that they had once again crawled into the frying pan.

Two of the militiamen kept them covered while the third hurried off to find an officer. As they waited, a familiar armored figure powered in on dorsal jets, touched down briefly, had a fast conversation with a group of officers, and then took off again. The DNA Cowboys looked at each other in blank disbelief.

'Jet Ace?'

'What the hell is he doing here?'

'Seems to be on our side.'

'Hurray for us.'

'I think it's confirmation that the world's gone crazy.'

Their exchange made the militia guards even more nervous. The one with a noncom badge snapped at them. 'No talking.'

Renatta tried to reassure them. 'Just take it easy. We're the good guys.'

A short, harried-looking junior officer hurried up. His expression made clear that the last thing he needed was the arrival of the DNA Cowboys.

'Who are you people?'

Reave did the talking. 'Free-lancers. We were separated from our unit, and we've been making our way back through the sewers and conduits.'

'How do I know that you're not enemy infiltrators?'

'You don't, but I doubt that the enemy needs to do any more

infiltrating.'

'What's the name of your commanding officer?'

'Reft Zill.'

The officer looked around. 'At least that is easily settled.' He called across the area. 'Master Zill, could you come over here?'

Reave sighed as Zill came waddling up. He could not think of any situation that could be improved by the presence of Reft Zill. 'Hi, Reft. Still alive, I see.'

'I could say the same for you.'

'Do you know these men?' the officer asked shortly.

Zill nodded. 'Sure. They're mine. In fact, I've been trying to locate them.'

'Can I leave them with you?'

'By all means.'

The officer and the three militiamen hurried away. Zill looked the DNA Cowboys up and down.

'So where have you been skulking?'

'Skulking? I'd lay bets that we've been closer to the fighting than you have.'

Zill made a dismissive gesture. 'This is all beside the point. I have a new assignment for you.'

Reave raised a suspicious eyebrow. 'An assignment? Now? What are we supposed to do? Form a suicide squad?'

'Our contracts have been transferred.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You get yourselves to the quadrant J platform. The last we heard, it hadn't fallen to the enemy. If that's the case, transportation will be waiting.'

'Transportation?'

'I thought that would get your attention. If you can make it there alive, you'll be getting out of the city.'

'Why us?'

Zill shook his head. 'Don't ask me. The biode came up with your names. You'd have been the last ones I would have chosen.'

Reave still could not believe what he was hearing. 'We can get out of here?'

'You've been selected to escort a party of the city's metaphysicians out to Palanaque.'

'Palanaque?'

Zill nodded. 'Anywhere's got to be better than here.'

Reave grunted. 'So the rats are leaving?'

'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.'

Reave half smiled. 'Have you found a way out, too?'

Zill's eyes hardened. 'That's none of your fucking business, Reave

Mekonta. Just get your ass to J platform and thank whatever miserable gods you may believe in that you've been given a second chance.'

It was Thelodian who wrote, "In this era of irritating mysteries nothing was more irritating (except perhaps humanity's capacity for accepting virtually anything as normal in the shortest possible time) than the matter of the disrupters." Few of the proffered explanations for the arrival of the disrupters in those troubled final days have come close to being satisfactory. The facts are not in dispute. The disrupters appeared like the sand-worms of Herbert, apparently composed of a thirdform matter that was a full ninety degrees more unorthodox than that which made up the nothings. They came, and they chewed their way through reality. When they were gone, they left a slimetrail of intolerable hallucination that faded only as the nothings reinsinuated themselves.

The Externalists, with characteristic tunnel vision, maintained that the disrupters were simply the final form of the Draan doomsday weapon that had started by causing the nothings and came to full cycle in the Final Cataclysm. Clearly, this is nonsense. The very fact that the Thousand Years War lasted for a full thousand years seems ample proof that the forces of the Draan and those of mankind were very evenly matched. There is no possibility that in the latter days of the war the Draan were able to command forces so far beyond the understanding of human beings. As with all Externalist arguments, the primary motivation behind the theory would appear to be not so much an arrival at the truth but the absolution of the human race from responsibility for its own

destruction.

The Juxtapositionists were considerably more inventive. Extending their central belief that the entire Damaged World effect was a result of the random encroachment of a neighboring extradimensional reality in the same area of actualspace, they claimed that the disrupters were merely an outside reflection of something that, although ultimately destructive to human reality, was perfectly normal in its own.

La Vortice, ever handy with the related painpattern and the Burden of Guilt, had his own gloomy and ponderous ideas. Of course, to buy the grim old Master's disrupter concept, one had also to accept his whole elegantly constructed but complex premise that humans brought it on themselves, that man was crushed by the massive monolithic burden of his monstrous history and culture and his inability to adapt when the divisions between the temporal and spiritual, the physical and the meta, became blurred and fragmented. The disrupter, according to La Vortice, was merely a product of that decay, a mutated virus in the already disease-racked body of reality. As he liked to repeat, "What could be closer to the human spirit than an entity that ate reality and shit hallucination?"

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER TWELVE

'There's seven of us.'

'Another fucking mystic number.'

The biode had picked an escort for the metaphysicians of Krystaleit that impressed even Billy with its radical weirdness. Waiting on the airship dock for their arrival were the DNA Cowboys and Renatta de Luxe; an armored trooper who had introduced himself as Lister Stent; Jet Ace, who was convinced that as a team they were destined for epic deeds; and Clay Blaisdell, who was drunk. There was also a hexaclone air crew of six, wearing trim, identical leather jodhpur suits, helmets like skullcaps with flaps, and raised propeller insignia. Behind them, the silver expanse of the dirigible R1009 rode gently on its mooring beams against a background of nothings that had become a deep purple. Inside the city all hell was breaking loose. It sounded as if the last organized stand had started.

The metaphysicians came out of the tunnel mouth. As always seemed to be the way with metaphysicians, their white bodysuits were spotless, and they seemed totally unconcerned about what was going on around them, except for maybe a bare acknowledgment of the need to hurry. There were twenty-seven of them, and they walked in a tight, informal procession, guarded by a squad of militiamen who formed a tense half circle behind them with their weapons leveled back down the tunnel. They seemed to expect that pursuit might catch up with them at any minute.

The metaphysicians did not hesitate. They walked straight up the lowered gangway and through the main lock of the dirigible. The air crew turned smartly and followed. Nobody had told the escort of seven what exactly they were expected to do, but they did not wait for an order to board. They hurried up the gangwayin the wake of the air crew. Renatta went first, and the DNA Cowboys followed. Blaisdell stumbled after them, and Stent and Jet Ace lumberingly brought up the rear. Reave had expected the militia to follow them — there was certainly enough room aboard the very large airship. Instead, they remained standing on the dock, looking nervously at the access tunnel. As the gangway rolled back and the port sighed shut, he noticed dial they did not even have stasis generators. There was no way out for them.

The main lock led to a long viewing gallery dial ran all the way around the outside of the lower gondola. Once inside the airship, the metaphysicians gathered in an exclusive group, holding an urgent whispered conversation. Renatta and the other three put down what gear they had managed to rescue from the Victory Cafe and went to

the viewing windows to take a last look at Krystaleit. The Minstrel Boy had insisted that they go back and retrieve his veetar, even threatening to go on his own when the others showed an understandable reluctance to risk their lives for a musical instrument, no matter how exotic, particularly as the Minstrel Boy appeared not to play it any longer. Surprisingly, it was Reave who had decided that it was only fitting that they rescue the Minstrel Boy's legendary instrument. When Billy had still seemed disinclined, Reave had pointed out that they had done as much for him when they had rescued Renatta. Renatta had immediately protested being equated with a veetar, but Reave had dismissed her complaint with a casual wave. It was not the nature of the rescuee that mattered. The common point was that both had been gratuitous, even selfless, operations that were carried out at the request of a comrade. His explanation in no way satisfied Renatta, but further argument was short-circuited by the spectacle of Stent lumbering across the deck with the unconscious Blaisdell draped across his outstretched metal arms.

A chime sounded, and the pleasant, melodic voice of the airship's passenger-aid intelligence came over a concealed PA.

'Please stand by. The R1009 is about to disengage its mooring beams and pull away from the docking platform. Turbulence may be experienced during the initial move under power, and major disturbance will occur during entry to the nothings. There will be a further warning before entering the nothings.'

There was something a little disturbing about the soothing tone of the artificial voice announcing their departure from a city that was being torn apart and butchered. Even more disturbing was the fact that the airship was almost empty. The R1009 was quite capable of lifting with a couple of hundred refugees, and it seemed almost criminal to Reave that it was leaving the city with just thirty-four passengers on board. The study of metaphysics appeared to do nothing to foster the growth of a humanitarian conscience.

The mooring beams snapped off, and the R1009 rose gently away from the platform. It was unbelievable that anything so large could move with such precision and delicacy. The vast, extended silver cigar was built externally on the ancient zeppelin pattern but with an industrial stasis generator and a pair of big mass repulsers where the gasbags had been back in the olden days. Its nose slowly turned, and once clear of the platforms, it pushed out to where the nothings waited. It sailed majestically toward emptiness, quite possibly the last ship to leave the city of Krystaleit as the world had known it, and there were only a handful of probably doomed soldiers to see it go.

The city's stasis field seemed to have extended since it had merged with that of the invaders. There was a considerable distance of

open air between the exterior of the structure and the start of the nothings. As the docking platform started to dwindle and merge with the other surface features and it was possible for the first time to see the curve of Krystaleit's miniature horizon, a giant gout of red flame spewed across all the platforms of an entire quadrant. There had obviously been a monstrous explosion somewhere inside. If the warlords let their orgy of violence run unchecked to its logical conclusion, they would finish by destroying themselves along with the city. Maybe that would be the only consolation in the whole sorry episode. The airship rolled with the shock wave and then slipped into the nothings with a minimum of vibration.

As soon as the R1009 had settled down to the monotonous process of traversing the nonmatter, one of the metaphysicians called for the attention of the seven chosen escorts. Six turned, ready to listen to what he had to say. Blaisdell was still sprawled in the lounge chair where Stent had dropped him, dead to the world.

'My name is Mannassas Showcross Gee, and during thisvoyage I will act as spokesperson for our group. I will also be available at all times to answer your questions and receive your input and suggestions.'

He paused as though giving them time to absorb the information. There was a tinge of condescension in his tone that the Minstrel Boy found mildly annoying. What was wrong with the other twenty-six of them? Were they too holy to speak to their bodyguards?

Showcross Gee went on. 'We are the twenty-seven metaphysicians of Krystaleit, and we have acquired your seven warrior contracts. We require you as personal protection on this journey and then to aid in the organization of a defense against a repeat of the rape of Krystaleit, should such a thing occur when we reach our destination. Does that, in principle, meet with your approval?'

Nobody seemed ready to answer, so Reave took it upon himself. 'Anything that got us out of Krystaleit sounds okay right now.'

Renatta raised a hand. 'Can you tell us about our destination? What is this place Palanaque?'

'The settlement of Palanaque is the creation of the Masters of Palanaque, and although it is not a metaphysical community and some broad philosophical differences do exist between our order and Parshew-a-Thar, the current Master, we will receive toleration, and the facilities there will enable us to continue with our research.'

Neither Billy nor the Minstrel Boy liked the sound of that. In the Minstrel Boy's experience, religious settlements were long on bullshit and short on fun. Billy's feelings were along the same lines but were many times compounded by his bad memories of the Sanctuary.

Billy gave Showcross Gee a long, hard look. 'How much tolerance

can we expect in this place?'

'You will be welcome there. As to creature comforts, there is much concentration on the tantric, so you should find many diverse ways to pass your leisure time.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled. He was not sure he was ready for a return to hours of blank-eyed sex, and he resented the fact that the metaphysicians' mouthpiece was holding it out as bait. He was seriously wondering what Showcross Gee took them for.

'It is also a very beautiful place. I think that you'll be happy there.'

The Minstrel Boy was halfway resolved to dislike the place on sight. Reave, on the other hand, was quite attracted to the idea of a little peace and quiet. Renatta reserved judgment. The metaphysicians were all men, and as far as she was concerned, that did not bode well.

Mannassas Showcross Gee had little more to say, and after he had departed, the seven were free to explore the public rooms of the R1009. Jet Ace and Stent immediately excused themselves and went off to find private cabins. Watching them go, Reave realized that he knew absolutely nothing about the personal and social lives of the men who were part machine. Clay Blaisdell was still out, and the four of them, the DNA Cowboys and Renatta, were thrown together yet again. A whisper sign on the observation deck suggested that they should visit the Silver Ballroom on the upper deck. Lacking a better idea, the four of them started for the escalators.

There was something quite eerie about moving through an empty luxury dirigible that should have been crowded with people. Where there should have been music, conversation, laughter, and the clink of glass, there was nothing but their footfalls echoing hollowly on the silver deck plates while the vast expanses of wall mirrors reflected the emptiness to infinity. The effect became even more bizarre when they caught sight of themselves in those mirrors — dirty, battle-blackened figures against the spotlessly lavish decor.

The Silver Ballroom was an indulgent expanse of highly polished Art Deco stainless steel. The dance floor, of translucent crystal lit from below, made all who walked on it look as though they were floating. It was obviously supposed to give the finishing touch to the overall ambience of haute aviation. Although there was no serving staff, the bar was fully stocked, which came as a considerable relief and did a lot to counteract the seeming absurdity that the four of them, so filthy and funky, should be the only ones in such a palace of opulence. Billy, who had been looking increasingly introspective, brightened noticeably and took on the role of bartender. Turning their backs on the echoing splendor, they set to drinking their way through the rest of the voyage.

After the first three rounds, Clay Blaisdell stumbled in looking

like the living dead. 'Dear God, do I feel bad.'

Billy took pity on him and started mixing him a bull's breath, the great traditional hangover cure. 'So what happened to you?'

'I got to tell you, I thought that it was all over. I was trapped in this half-collapsed building, the rest of the squad had all been killed, and I was resigning myself to facing the great unknown.'

'So how did you manage to get so drunk?'

Blaisdell gratefully accepted the yellowish-green bull's breath. 'I had a couple of bottles of scotch in my pack, and I decided that there was no percentage in facing the end sober.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed. 'I can empathize with that.'

Renatta sipped her martini. 'So how did you get out?'

Clay Blaisdell drained half the cocktail and winced as it started to take effect. 'It was weird. I was about a bottle and a half into not going gently into that dark night when I heard this terrible crashing, like Godzilla was trying to rip his way into the building. I figured it had to be some of Baptiste's or Taraquin's men coming in to get me, but by then I was too drunk to care and didn't have any ammunition left to do anything about it, anyway.'

He drained the second half of the bull's breath and pushed the empty glass back to Billy for a refill.

'Instead of the enemy, though, Jet Ace comes smashing through a wall and announces that he's come to rescue me because my contract's been transferred. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I wasn't in a position to argue. Next thing I know I'm standing around with you guys waiting to get on a blimp. Somewhere around about then, I decided the best thing would be to pass out cold and let destiny take its course. I take it we got away from Krystaleit.'

Billy passed him another bull's breath. 'That's right. We live to fight another day.'

'Has anybody told us where we're headed?'

Billy nodded. 'Yeah, we had us a little orientation lecture while you were sleeping it off.'

'And?'

'And we're on our way to Palanaque to be bodyguards to a bunch of metaphysicians.'

'I never really cottoned to metaphysicians. Always talking down to you.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'Ain't that the truth.'

Blaisdell looked around at each of them. 'Anyone ever been to Palanaque?'

Renatta and the DNA Cowboys all shook their heads. Blaisdell sipped his drink. He was slowing down a little on the second one.

'It's real beautiful to look at, but it's land of weird. The first

Master, Stafford Pardee, was an air pirate who suddenly wanted to get religion. He couldn't find one that suited him, so he invented one for himself. He built the settlement according to his pirate's idea of a holy city. It's part Egyptian, part Aztec, an awful lot of Martianois, and a dash of Thanos. After twelve generations it's still all there.' He suddenly grinned. 'Of course, I couldn't say the same about some of the inhabitants. There's quite a few that are a long way out there.'

Renatta poured herself another martini. 'But what's it like to actually live there?'

Blaisdell pulled a wry face. 'It's okay at first. Kind of relaxing. It gets tired pretty fast, though. You spend a hell of a lot of time watching the palms wave. There's one thing in its favor that you can always count on: By the time you get sick of them, you can be sure that they've gotten sick of you. In that respect, Palanaque's quite self-regulating.' He took another sip of bull's breath. 'So what happened to the metal men? How come they aren't carousing with us regular folk?'

'They took themselves off on their own as soon as we got aboard.'

Blaisdell seemed to be on his best behavior and even willing to mend a few fences. The Minstrel Boy wondered if he was genuinely trying to make the best of the situation or if it was just a display for Renatta. The Minstrel Boy had to hand it to Renatta. She sure as hell got around even in the most limited area of opportunity. The metal men were the only ones she had not bedded out of their less than magnificent seven.

Blaisdell was still thinking about Stent and Jet Ace. 'Did you ever wonder what those guys do when they're off on their own? What they do for fun?'

As he spoke, his eyes flickered to Renatta for an instant. The Minstrel Boy caught the look. He had had the same thought at exactly the same time. Just before the attack, things had not seemed to be going too well between Renatta and Blaisdell. Did that mean that her next move would be to Jet Ace or Lister Stent?

'I even wonder how much of that stuff they take off before they bed down for the night.'

Although Reave laughed, his mind was still back with what they had been through in Krystaleit. 'It occurs to me that Palanaque won't be too relaxing if Baptiste and Taraquin and the rest follow us there.'

'Why should they follow us?'

'Baptiste, at least, is somewhat obsessed about metaphysicians. He's going to be fit to be tied when he finds out that Krystaleit's got away.'

Billy's face lost its smile. 'You might have a point there.' He looked at Blaisdell. 'Does Palanaque have anything approaching a military?'

'It's got an army, but you can forget about it. They drill on the river plain in front of the city. Classic Macedonian. Strictly spear squares and cavalry. There are no projectile or beam weapons allowed in the settlement. Not even bows and arrows.'

Reave looked very unhappy. 'What about our weapons?'

'We'll probably get a dispensation, but I don't doubt that we'll have to argue about it for a while.'

The talk and drinking went on and the old stories came out as the nothings shimmered outside the observation windows. The only one who did not contribute to the bragging and bullshit about the good old golden days was Renatta, who seemed unwilling to let slip the slightest detail about her past. The Minstrel Boy had wondered on a number of occasions what there was in her history that made her treat it like a closed and sealed book. It hardly seemed possible that she had done something so disgraceful that she should be ashamed to talk about it in this present scurvy company. Unless, of course, she had managed to invent a truly disgusting and original sin. The girl was certainly resourceful enough.

Even in a reality as large as the R1009 it became very difficult to calculate the passage of time as they passed through the nothings. For a while the Minstrel Boy had kept it semipegged by counting his drinks, but eventually even that became difficult. It was thus that he had no idea how long they had been in theship's Silver Ballroom when Showcross Gee came looking for them.

'Gentlemen, lady. I have a very important announcement.'

The five of them turned and looked at him.

'As far as our lizardbrain simulacrum can tell, the city of Krystaleit is no more.'

Reave stiffened. 'What do you mean, no more?'

'It no longer registers even on our most powerful detection equipment. A short while ago, it simply vanished.'

Blaisdell propped himself up on the bar. 'Did any smaller reality mass remain behind when it vanished?'

Showcross Gee shook his head. 'Nothing.'

Blaisdell looked at the others. 'You know what that means?'

Reave nodded. 'The warlords destroyed themselves right along with the city. I know I shouldn't be pleased about a whole city being taken out, but it does come as something of a relief. I'd hate to go through that whole fight all over again.'

Showcross Gee nodded. 'Those are our sentiments entirely.'

Showcross Gee left, and the timeless drinking resumed. It started to seem that it was not even possible to get satisfactorily drunk while passing through the nothings. The Minstrel Boy was only developing a headache. When the airship suddenly lurched and he had to grab hold

of the bar he imagined that it was in his own head and that he was drunker than he had thought. Then the second shock hit the R1009, and everyone went staggering. Beyond the observation windows, the nothings were suffused with red.

'What the hell is going on?'

As they picked themselves up from the silver floor, a vibration ran through the ship like a shudder. The airship lurched again, and everyone was once again thrown down. Renatta had a small cut over her right eye. Billy wrapped his arms around a stanchion.

'Grab hold of something and hang on! I don't think we've seen the worst of this.'

The vibration became increasingly violent. Bottles fell from the bar and smashed on the floor. A mirror shattered in its frame. It started to feel as though the ship were trying to shake itself to pieces. Outside, the nothings were a dazzling, pulsingcrimson. As well as shaking, the R1009 seemed to be fishtailing out of control and rolling from side to side.

'You think this could have something to do with the destruction of Krystaleit, like a shockwave or something?'

'Who knows? Anything can happen in the nothings.'

The Minstrel Boy clung desperately to a bar support. 'I hate unexplained phenomena.'

There was a bright red flash, and then the nothings went back to what the Minstrel Boy thought of as normal. Normal, that is, except for the large and diffused red sphere that was rapidly floating away from them.

'What?'

'We must have been inside that thing.'

Renatta wiped blood from her eye. 'I didn't think anything could exist in the nothings.'

'All we know is that *we* can't exist in the nothings. There could be a whole other universe out there.'

Billy smiled grimly. 'And it's probably as screwed up as this one.'

Just as they thought they were through the turbulence, the vibration started again and rapidly worsened. Soon the whole fabric of the ship was loudly protesting at the treatment it was receiving. It was buffeted as though it were being hit repeatedly by a giant hammer. Billy lost his hold and went sliding across the ballroom floor as the ship rolled through forty-five degrees. It was lucky that the chairs and tables were bolted down or he would have been buried by furniture. As it was, a drift of bottles and broken glass slid along with him; his hands were cut, and his clothes were soaked with an impossibly exotic mixture of alcohol.

'Goddamn it to hell! I'm fucking sick of this!'

Then they were out of the nothings. Of all things, snow was blowing past the window. There was a banshee howling outside the ship that was deafening after the oppressive silence of the nonmatter.

'This is not right.' The Minstrel Boy crawled hand over hand until he reached a window. The R1009 was bucking and barreling though a mountain range of implausibly sharp rock spires with a blizzard shrieking through its steep passes and deep ravines. The ship all but grazed one of the spindly peaks,missing it by a fraction. 'I think we've run head-on into some random reality.'

'How does it look?'

'It doesn't look good.'

As abruptly as they had come, the mountains were gone again. The still shuddering airship banked drunkenly, and the Minstrel Boy found that he was looking out over a landscape that was as flat as a billiard table and was divided into huge, geometric black and white squares. Here and there sharp outcroppings of rock appeared to have pushed their way up through the level surface, forcing deep cracks in the monster mosaic.

The R1009 was sinking lower and lower over the scarcely credible plain. The vibration went on rattling their nerves. For a minute or more the ship stopped rolling and managed to hold a relatively steady course.

The Minstrel Boy took a few quick steps toward the ballroom's nearest exit. 'I'm going to get the portable SGs from our gear. I don't trust this ship not to start breaking up. There's something really wrong here.'

Reave worked his way toward him. 'We might as well all go. If something does come unglued, we'd do well to grab as much of our gear as we can.' He peered out of an observation window.

The Minstrel Boy joined him.

'It doesn't even look like an inhabitable reality,' the Minstrel Boy commented.

'What's that over there?'

Reave was pointing to something, little more than a smudge on the horizon but growing bigger as they watched it. The Minstrel Boy shaded his eyes. The sky was a bright white glare that was reflected back from the white geometric squares as the shadow of the airship raced over them.

'It looks like a dust cloud; could be being thrown up by some kind of vehicle.'

'Hell of a big vehicle. That cloud's a long way away.'

There was one problem. Although whatever was creating the dust cloud was traveling over the black and white squares, the dust being thrown up was gaudy and multicolored; it hung in the air, spiraling

and twisting. The closer the thing came — and it seemed to be traveling at a speed well in excess of those normally achieved by land vehicles — the more the Minstrel Boy and Reave came to realize that it was very big indeed. It alsoseemed to be partially buried in the ground, plowing through the flat, smooth surface.

'What the hell is that thing?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head. 'I don't know, but I don't like it.'

Billy had come up beside him. His eyes were wide with horror. 'I know what that is.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy both looked at him. 'What is it?'

'It's a disrupter.'

The word rolled like a toll of doom. It was one of the most feared words in the whole Damaged World.

'Are you sure?'

'Did you ever see one?'

Billy took a deep breath. 'No, I never saw one, but there was this guy living at the Sanctuary who told me all about it in one of his lucid moments. This is exactly as he described. One tore into his settlement and just chewed up reality. If that wasn't bad enough, it left behind this wake like a walking nightmare. It drove the ones that were left quite mad. This guy was one of the few survivors.'

'What do you mean, one of his lucid moments?'

'He giggled uncontrollably most of the time.'

The fear of the disrupter was partially the fear of the unknown. They were rarely seen; most people had only heard the lurid tales of their capacity for destruction. So little was known about them that there was no way to predict where and when they might burst through from whatever dimension or nether-place they normally occupied and tear into the world of mortals to create chaos and damage beyond belief. More than one culture had a nighttime prayer that started 'Deliver us from the fury of the disrupter.'

The airship was still descending, although the vibration had greatly subsided. It actually seemed to be slowing to a stop right in the path of the oncoming disrupter. The Minstrel Boy stared at the thing as though he were mesmerized. The shock seemed to have robbed him of the will to do anything to save himself. It was not that he had led what could remotely be described as a sheltered life. He had seen more than most men, but the monster in front of him was something out of legend. There was no certainty that the death that it was undoubtedly bringing was anatural one rather than some hideous transfer to an unknowable discorporation beyond the nothings. For the first time in his life he felt totally helpless. He suddenly became aware that Reave was tugging at his arm.

'Come on, let's get going.'

'What's the point? You can't run away from a disrupter.'

'We can get the SGs. We'll need them if we get through this.'

The Minstrel Boy tore his eyes away from the disrupter and followed Reave, even though he truly believed that it was a futile exercise. If a disrupter came after a person, there was nothing he could do except kiss his ass good-bye.

It was now possible to see something of the disrupter itself. It was a dark shape in the center of the garish residue that was fountaining up on either side of it as it sliced through the surface of reality. It appeared to be roughly cylindrical with an open, gaping maw that seemed to be sucking in the living rock. There was what looked like a line of jutting extensions along the top side of the thing, like spines or a kind of composite dorsal fin, but it was hard to make out any real physical details because the disrupter apparently had the capacity actually to absorb light. At the same time, however, it glittered from within, as though tiny stars were trapped inside its dark bulk.

The airship had come to a full stop, hanging in the air a mere thirty feet above the ground. The disrupter was coming straight at it. The DNA Cowboys, Clay Blaisdell, and Renatta stood in the observation gallery. Billy checked his SG; Reave had put a protective arm around Renatta. Blaisdell gripped the guardrail in front of the window with white-knuckled hands. The Minstrel Boy just stared. There was no sign of the crew, the metaphysicians, or the two metal men. The disrupter had come close enough for the five of them to see deep into the thing's open maw. In front of it, solid matter seemed to flare and become unstable, and then, with the consistency of liquid, it was effortlessly swallowed. There seemed to be some dark energy inside that glittered in a way that no darkness ever glittered in the real world. The Minstrel Boy could almost feel it calling to him, beckoning him to be part of it.

The disrupter was only a matter of a couple of hundred yards away. To everyone's complete surprise, the airship began to lift, as if it were being pushed upward and out of the way by some invisible bow wave that preceded the disrupter.

'We're going up. I thought for sure that we were going to be sucked into it.'

The disrupter was directly underneath them. The R1009 suddenly rolled and staggered. The last thing the Minstrel Boy remembered was Reave bellowing.

'Hang on! Here we go!'

They were inside something else. What a second before had been normality was now so totally twisted out of shape that the Minstrel Boy had difficulty believing that he was still alive or even that he was the same being he had been before. Sound, vision, touch, and

temperature, even the familiar comfort of up and down — none of it was remotely like anything he had previously experienced. Perspective twisted, coiled, and undulated. Shards of color with razor-sharp edges rushed at him and threatened to slice his flesh to ribbons, except that he no longer had flesh. His body was being stretched and distorted all the way to infinity. His whole environment had become an alien place where only fragments of his personality crawled and cowered. It was as if there were other entities all around him, but isolated, separated, unable to communicate anything but a common pain and a common loss. Were they other victims of the disrupter? At the heart of it all there was a being that was beyond alien. Even the word "alien" had a form and a recognizable perimeter. This thing had nothing except the unmistakable will to consume. All that translated was its hunger, a cosmic hunger from a cosmos that was so far removed that the Minstrel Boy was unable to conceive of it even though he could feel the pain of that relentless now-and-forever need. The other entities — and he had no reason to believe that he was not one of them — swirled around it in unhappy orbit, reflecting the need. Strange voices that spoke in tongues that he could not even begin to understand forced their way into his head. He was falling and flying and floating; he was drowning in a molasses-thick sea of vibrating noncolor. He was being scorched and frozen in a dark place that was on the other side of blinding white light. He was disintegrating, and it would go on until eternity. He heard a voice screaming, and it sounded like his own.

'For God's sake, stop!'

And, miraculously, it did. He was back in the airship hangingon to a guardrail for dear life. The R1009 was in a great deal of trouble. As far as he could tell, it was standing on its nose while dark madness roiled past the windows. There was an explosion somewhere in the bow, and then a second one above them. They were falling, spinning. His arms felt as if they were being wrenched out of their sockets as he clung on.

'We're going down!'

The airship was wallowing, a sign that someone was trying to regain control. It yawed sideways, and although it was still dropping, it no longer fell like a stone.

'Ground's coming up!'

'Where's the disrupter?'

'It's passed. We're going through its wake.'

'Hang on!'

The R1009 impacted, bounced, and hit again. It slid for about fifty yards in a single shriek of protesting metal and finally slewed to a stop. Reave was the first one to get to his feet. Smoke drifted through

the seriously canting observation deck, but there was no fire.

'Is everyone okay?'

There were groans of acknowledgment. No one had suffered more than cuts and bruises.

Billy was nursing a sprained wrist. 'An old-fashioned Flash Gordon airship crash where everyone dusts themselves off and walks away.'

'An old-fashioned what?'

Billy shook his head and helped Blaisdell to his feet. 'Nothing.'

Reave cut through the cross talk. Billy could go on all night dragging weird stuff out of his memory. It was something he did in the aftermath of stress. 'Let's get out of here. The damn thing could still blow up.'

Power was out, so the Minstrel Boy threw the lock onto manual mode and wrestled with the wheel that swung the door open. The five of them hurried through it and then kept up a fast walk until they were some fifty yards from the grounded ship. It was only when they were what Reave considered to be a safe distance away that they turned to look back at it. Considering what the R1009 had been through, it was in comparatively good shape. The framework was twisted in a couple of places, and parts of the outer skin had been blown away, but it had not broken up.

The worst damage was up by the nose, where a blackened hole had been blown in the fuselage.

Renatta sighed. 'I guess it lost its luxury status.'

Billy glanced at Reave. 'You think there's any chance of it flying again?'

Reave scratched his head. 'I'm damned if I know. These things are supposed to be able to fly when they're half falling apart, but this baby's taken a lot of punishment'

At that moment a smaller lock nearer the nose popped open. The metaphysicians began carefully climbing out. They seemed hardly touched by the crash. Not even their bodysuits were dirty. Reave went back to meet them, but before he could reach the main group, Showcross Gee detached himself from the other twenty-six and headed him off.

'This is a bad business,' the metaphysician said.

Reave nodded. 'Have you seen anything of the crew? Did they survive?'

Showcross Gee shook his head. 'We simply got ourselves; out of the aircraft, just as you did.' Showcross Gee was nor going to brook any reproach from the help.

Reave looked back at the ship. 'I guess we ought to go back inside and see if there's anyone left alive in there. It doesn't look as though

the ship's going to blow.'

He started to round up the others, but Showcross Gee called him back. 'Do you have any idea what this place might be?'

Reave looked across the strange checkerboard plain. 'I don't have a clue, except that it doesn't look like an area of generated stasis. I think this is something random, and I'd like to get out of here as soon as we possibly can.'

Showcross Gee was thoughtful. 'That's interesting. I think I tend to agree with you.'

He knelt down and placed a hand flat on the ground. 'Strange.'

'I think I ought to go and look for survivors.'

Showcross Gee ignored Reave. 'It hardly feels like any normal mineral at all.'

Reave was getting a little tired of Showcross Gee's detached indifference. 'What does it feel like?'

'I hesitate to guess.'

'I'm going to look for survivors.'

Showcross Gee straightened up, dusting off his hands. 'At least we saw a disrupter close up.'

Reave scowled. 'That's a treat I could have missed.'

He walked over to where the others were waiting and beckoned to the Minstrel Boy. 'You come with me. We're going to the control room to see if any of the crew made it through the crash. Billy and Renatta, you two go aft and check the cabins. See what happened to Jet Ace and Stent.'

Clay Blaisdell glanced around. 'What do I do?'

Reave nodded toward the metaphysicians. 'Keep an eye on them. See that they don't pull anything.'

'What could they pull?'

'I don't know, but I don't trust them.'

Showcross Gee had rejoined the other twenty-six. They had walked over to the deep trench left by the disrupter that ran like a long straight scar in the geometric landscape, clear to the horizon. They were peering into it. Strange shards of color still lingered in the trench, gradually fading.

Reave and the Minstrel Boy made their way through the ship, walking with great care on the tilted deck. The door to the control room was jammed, and they had to force it. Inside they found that a bulkhead had been blown out, and although one control console remained just about intact, the rest of the control surfaces were a spaghetti of tangled metal, shattered tubes, and slimy ropes of leaking biogel. Two from the crew of six were bending over a third who had a bad head wound. A fourth was sprawled on a contour chair with her head at an angle that left no doubt that she was dead. The remaining

two were rigging bridging lines to the control console that was still intact. They all turned in alarm as Reave came through the door, shoulder first.

'I'm sorry to burst in like this; it was jammed.'

'Don't worry about it. We couldn't get it open from the inside. We feared we were trapped in here.'

Reave noted that no matter what their fears, the crew members were still calmly going about their business. There was something robotlike about the hexads that ran airships.

'Do you need any help?' he asked.

'I think we can manage now that the door's open.'

'How bad is the damage?'

'We should be able to lift the ship in a couple of hours. Control will have to be largely manual, but we will be able to fly.'

'What about the stasis field?'

'We'll be ready to test that in a few minutes.'

'So we have no insurmountable problems?'

'There is one.'

'What's that?'

The crewman indicated a section of tangled wreckage that Reave had been trying not to look at. Something pale and bloody was crushed in the middle of it.

'The brain host is dead.'

That was something that turned even Reave's stomach. The lizardbrain core of the guidance system had been grafted onto a tailored human host — if, indeed, something could be called human that had no arms, legs, nose, or mouth, that breathed through a vent in its chest like a gill and stared unblinkingly out of huge, mad saucer eyes.

'So we have no guidance?'

'None.'

'What would be our chances of finding a settlement if we just went in blind?'

'In a reality this size, it could be years before a chance stasisfall. Maybe hundreds of years.'

'Suppose we stay here and wait for help?'

'It's our estimation that here may not be here for very much longer. It has the feel of something random and very unstable. It may have only developed at the coming of the disrupter, and, now that it's gone, all this could simply vanish.'

Reave slowly turned and faced the Minstrel Boy. He did not have to voice what he was thinking.

The Minstrel Boy sagged. 'I really don't want to do this.'

The crewman looked at the two of them inquiringly. 'Is there

something I should know?'

'The Minstrel Boy has a lizardbrain implant.'

The crewman beamed. 'Then we have no insurmountable problems.'

'He has to use cyclatrol to achieve cognizance.'

The crewman's face fell. 'Oh.'

The Minstrel Boy regarded him with an expression that was almost sad. 'You know what that means?'

'I understand it involves extreme stress.'

'You can say that again, Jack.'

Reave put a hand on the Minstrel Boy's shoulder. They both knew that in the end he was going to do it. They also knew that by doing it he was putting his sanity at considerable risk.

Reave faced the crewman. 'You have cyclatrol?'

'Plenty. It was fed constantly to the brain host.'

The Minstrel Boy sighed. 'Poor bastard.'

While Reave and the Minstrel Boy were engaged with the crew and the problem of navigation, Billy and Renatta moved from cabin to cabin in search of Stent and Jet Ace. They were almost to the stern when Renatta pushed open a door, let out a startled gasp, then quickly beckoned to Billy.

'This you gotta see.'

It was one of the smallest caibins. Stent and Jet Ace were both on the floor, pressed together in the narrow space between the bunk and the floor, where they must have been thrown by the first violent bucking of the ship. Each man had removed about half his metal exterior. What was revealed was not a pretty sight. Jet Ace was normal from the neck up but Stent had doughy, lopsided features, as though being encased in armor all his life had never allowed real features to develop. Clumps of sparse white hair that appeared never to have seen the sun stuck out on patches from his otherwise bald skull. Ugly polyp growth patched discolored skin. One of the creepiest parts was the way the hard polished metal of their prosthetics buried itself in their living bodies. The flesh around those points was red and raw, as though it still rebelled against foreign incursions. Stranger still, though, was the way the two of them were joined together by an elaborate network of jumper cables.

'So this is what they do when they're alone,' Billy said.

'And that's what they look like with their clothes off.'

'They must have been so busy fucking that the first time the ship bounced, they were thrown off the bed.'

'You think fucking is the right word?'

Renatta started to giggle uncontrollably. She was still giggling

when Jet Ace opened his eyes.

'You've seen us.'

Billy was having trouble stopping himself from laughing. 'Most people start off with 'Where am I?'

'What happened?'

'We crashed. We were almost eaten by a disrupter.'

'A disrupter? Is it still around?'

Billy shook his head. 'No, it's gone.'

Jet Ace was struggling to sit up. He was hampered by Stent, who was also coming around, thrashing about and entangling himself in the jumper cables. Renatta had another attack of giggles. Jet Ace looked at her resentfully.

'You shouldn't judge, you know.'

Renatta had trouble talking through her fresh fit of giggling. 'I'm sorry. . I'm not. . it's just. .'

Jet Ace became very stiff. 'Would you mind leaving while we dress?'

There was no more laughter when they all gathered in the control room. It was time to be deadly serious. Jet Ace and Stent were back in their armor, inscrutable again. Billy and Reave looked worried, and the Minstrel Boy had the face of a man going to his execution.

'Is it really going to hurt him that much?' Renatta whispered to Blaisdell.

'Could kill him.'

'God.'

Showcross Gee was the only metaphysician present. The others had taken themselves off to their staterooms. He watched the Minstrel Boy impassively. 'There are certain metaphysical techniques — '

The Minstrel Boy turned and snarled at him. 'And you're going to teach them to me in the time we have left?'

Showcross Gee made a slight bow of submission. 'You're right. There wouldn't be time.'

'So don't even talk about it, all right? Let's just get on with this.' He faced the crewman who did all the talking. 'Are you ready?'

The crewman nodded. 'We are ready to raise the airship. If you would all find handholds. There may be a certain amount of vibration.'

Another of the crew, one of the two remaining women, grasped the primary control levers and eased back on them. The R1009 shuddered. She eased back farther. The shuddering increased, then, suddenly, the ship rolled, and the deck righteditself. There was pressure under their feet, and then, with the twisted frame groaning loudly, the airship slowly rose from the ground.

'We have lift-off.'

The crew spokesman looked inquiringly at the Minstrel Boy. 'Are you ready to take the drug and merge with the remains of the biode?'

'How long will I have to be under?'

'As soon as we have a lock on Palanaque, we'll bring you out.'

'Make sure you do.'

'How shall we administer the cyclatrol?'

'An old-fashioned IV will do.'

> *Although his personality and presentation left a lot to be desired, and his use of poetic analogue and his uncompromising obscurism made him many enemies in the academic community, it has to be said that the La Vortice analysis of the Damaged World era was one of the most perceptive views of this perplexing segment of history. In his essay 'I Sing the Body Reality,' he likens the decay and destruction of the human environment to the physical and mental collapse of a single individual. The series of events that produced the Damaged World and the Final Cataclysm were not merely unrelated disasters but a pattern of breakdown that, once started, was irreversible. Just as in a dying man the liver and kidneys cease to function, the lungs fill with fluid, and the brain retreats into shock and hallucination, the coming of the nothings, the disrupters, and the cycles of violence were all parts of the same thing, symptoms of the overall collapse. La Vortice points out with a dour glee that one of the; first reactions of a dying man is one of complete disbelief. Re ality cannot be trusted because nothing is as it seems.*
>
> *— Pressdra Vishnaria*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The minstrel boy stalked into the silver ballroom,stiff-legged and with a face like a mask. Strangest of all, he was carrying the veetar. Renatta was instantly on her feet.

'Are you okay?'

The Minstrel Boy completely ignored her. He walked to a chair on the far side of the ballroom and sat down. Billy, Reave, and Blaisdell watched silently from the bar. They had seen people coming off the horror of cyclatrol before. It was best to leave them alone. Interference in the process could produce a flash flood of irrational fury. Cyclatrol racked up a lot of short-term anger. Renatta looked around at the other three for some sign as to what to do. Reave placed a finger on his lips and shook his head, warning her to leave well enough alone.

The Minstrel Boy placed the veetar across his lap; his hands gently caressed it, and a wash of soaring notes flowed across the ballroom. He looked up with an expression of mild surprise, peering into thin air as though he were trying to see the music. The first experimental notes grew into an assured rhythmic cascade. The Minstrel Boy's eyes were closed, and his head was slightly inclined. A vein pulsed slightly in his forehead. He played experimentally, searchingly, for close to two minutes, as though feeling for a new power that he relished but distrusted. So far, so good. He started growing stronger each time he repeated the figure, and then his lips began to move. At first his voice was too soft to hear.

'The only thing to grasp for is my place in history.'

Again he looked into thin air as though wondering where the line had come from. He repeated it less tentatively.

The only thing to grasp for is my place in history
You hear me, sweet thing?
The boy is running thirsting
For that fatal dose
Rising from the vault of horror
Under the broken sky
Sea at his feet
And the fire of cities at his back
No time to sleep now
The only thing to ask for is my place in history
You hear me, sweet thing?

Clay Blaisdell undid the snaps on the case of his chromacon and

then looked up at Reave. Reave looked uncertain and finally shrugged. What harm could it do? Blaisdell walked slowly toward the Minstrel Boy but received no acknowledgment. He squatted down on the floor, virtually at the Minstrel Boy's feet. His hands moved across the pressure angles, laying down a solid counterpoint to the Minstrel Boy's insistent drive. The Minstrel Boy briefly opened his eyes. He half smiled, then retired back into his own world.

The only thing to crave is immortality
And death is the last rube to cheat
You hear me, sweet thing?
Beyond the thunder
And behind the clouds
The rain is gentle as the massage of the lotus
But the damned can't linger
Hi ho silver lining
The only thing to trade is my place in history
You hear me, sweet thing?

The Minstrel Boy brought the poem to an abrupt halt. Blaisdell looked up in confusion, wondering what was going to happen next. The Minstrel Boy stared around at the others with a wolfish grin.

'You hear me, sweet thing?'

He laughed.

'You hear that? Fuck! I can do it again. I can actually do it!'

Billy, Reave, and Renatta broke out into spontaneous applause. There was no one in the Silver Ballroom of the R1009 who underestimated what the Minstrel Boy had been through. The only question was whether cyclatrol had freed a logjam in the Minstrel Boy's head or whether he had just been driven deeper into the swamp.

As the airship had approached the margin of the nothings, he had been strapped into a hastily rigged contour frame that looked ominously like an instrument of torture. The restraints on him were double-checked in order to minimize the chances of his hurting himself during the expected convulsions. The IV feed was inserted and taped down to his arm, intelligence cushion contacts were placed on the palms of his hands, and his hands were closed into fists and taped shut. With the preparations complete, the first drops of cyclatrol were introduced into his bloodstream.

The effect was instantaneous. His face distorted into what looked like a rictus. His mourn gaped wide in a silent scream, his eyes rolled back into his head, and his whole body twisted and strained against the straps. One of the crew maintained the flow of cyclatrol, and as the drug progressively flooded his system, the rest calmly studied the

images that were beginning to appear on the display-sized pseudosurface that dominated the navigator's station.

Renatta put a hand to her mouth. 'I'm not sure that I can watch this.'

One of the crew members looked around. 'It would probably be less distressing if all of you left the control room. You have no function here.'

It was just ten minutes before the combination of the damaged biode and the Minstrel Boy's brain implant located the reality of Palanaque and locked on it. The drug flow was cut as the biode took over the lock, and the Minstrel Boy started screaming out loud. It was twenty minutes before he stopped. When they brought him back to the others, he was white as a sheet and beaded with oily sweat. Billy tried to force cognac between his teeth, but his jaw was locked.

Renatta looked alarmed. 'Is he dead?'

'No, but I think he's in major shock.'

'What can we do for him?'

Reave shook his head. 'There's nothing we can do except let him be.'

The Minstrel Boy confirmed the wisdom of Reave's words just five minutes later when he let out a long agonized sigh and sat bolt upright. 'Okay, so hit it. Don't keep me in suspense. Let's get it over with.'

'He's in a world of his own.'

The Minstrel Boy stood up. With the expression of a zombie, he slowly and mechanically walked away. Renatta started after him, but Reave stopped her.

'Let him be.'

'Shouldn't we go with him?'

'If he wants to be on his own, that's probably for the best.'

'Suppose he kills himself or something while he's like this?'

'I doubt he would, but if he did, it would be his prerogative. A man who's just been overdosed with cyclatrol might have his reasons for not wanting to live any longer.'

But when the Minstrel Boy had been gone for more than three hours, even Reave began to worry. Despite his outward what-ever-happens-happens brand of fatalism, he still did not want to see anything happen to the Minstrel Boy. Thus it was a considerable relief when the Minstrel Boy came walking into the Silver Ballroom carrying the veetar, even though it was clear that he was not fully recovered.

After the first strange musical outburst, the Minstrel Boy went on playing, but with less of that passionate fury. He cut Blaisdell increasing amounts of slack, and inside an hour he had regained some of his color and was happily dueling while Renatta sat close and

watched him adoringly. Reave noted that the Minstrel Boy seemed to be the hero of the hour.

As the time-vague nothings streamed by, the journey took on a whole new feel, There was no more to worry about. The disrupter was gone. The warlords and their raiders had destroyed themselves, and although Palanaque might have its drawbacks, life there could hardly be described as ruggisd. Waiting turned into a party as they drank what booze had survived the crash and watched the two poets working out. Even Jet Ace and Stent came out and joined them, although they sheepishly remained in full armor.

The time went by so fast that it was something of a surprise when the PA announced that they were approaching stasisfall at Palanaque and that those who wanted to see the settlement as they came in over it should go to the; forward viewing gallery. There was considerable merriment as everyone, including the metal men, trooped forward to the gallery.

They were coming into Palanaque at night. Not until morning would they see the full formal grandeur of the city's architecture, but it was hard to miss the Great Pyramid. Floodlights played over the white polished marble of its surfaces, and red, green, and gold lasers flashed across the sky from its apex.

Billy glanced at Blaisdell. 'Does Palanaque have regular night and day?'

Blaisdell nodded. 'Sure does. Both of them, every day. Twelve hours of one and then twelve hours of the other.'

Tiny points of light moved below them like a bright living carpet. They were particularly concentrated at the base of the Great Pyramid. A wide, circular pool was bathed in blue light, and tiny figures could be seen swimming in formation in the illuminated waters. Green floodlights in a grove of palms gave the trees a weird, ghostly quality. The lights of small boats stood out on a dark area that, judging by the rippling reflections, had to be a river.

'Looks pretty busy down there.'

'Oh, sure, they know how to party in Palanaque. Only trouble is everything has to have some bullshit religious significance. Gets in the way of old-fashioned material fun.'

Billy continued to stare out of the gallery windows. 'So where do you think we're going to land this thing?'

The answer came from behind. 'We will put it down right in front of the pyramid.'

Everyone turned in surprise to see Showcross Gee standing there with the other metaphysicians in back of him. Reave wished that they would not sneak around the way they did.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Isn't that a little aggressive?'

'We have to exact our due respect from Great Master Parshew-a-Thar and his people.'

'Exact? We're refugees. Do you really think we should be exacting anything?'

'We are the twenty-seven metaphysicians of Krystaleit.'

'So we drop in on them like gods from the skies.'

'That is an exaggeration.'

The PA intrupted the exchange. 'Reave Mekonta?'

'Yo.'

'We are receiving electrical radio messages from the ground. Do you wish to answer them?'

'What do they want?'

'They wish us to identify ourselves. They seem to fear that we have hostile intent.'

Reave looked at Showcross Gee. 'You want to handle this?'

Showcross Gee shook his head. 'You are the bodyguards. This is your responsibility. We wish to set down exactly in front of the Great Pyramid.'

Reave sighed. 'Whatever you say, boss.' He turned to Billy. 'You come with me. The rest of you stay here.'

In the control room Reave was handed an antique microphone. A voice was coming from an equally ancient speaker.

'Palanaque ground to unidentified airship. You have violated our reality and airspace. Please identify yourself.'

'We are Airship R1009 out of Krystaleit.'

'Please say again, R1009.'

Reave repeated it. 'I say again, we are Airship R1009 out of Krystaleit.'

There was a long pause. When the radio voice came back, it was flat and hard. 'Krystaleit is no longer.'

'We were the last ship out.'

'To whom are we speaking?'

'I am Reave Mekonta, Master of Arms on the R1009.'

Reave had remembered Blaisdell's warning that they might have to do some fast talking if they wanted to keep their weapons. It was never too early to start laying the groundwork.

'Who else is on the ship?'

'The twenty-seven metaphysicians of Krystaleit.'

'We cannot allow you to land.'

'Why not?'

'It is inauspicious. We are in the middle of the Cha'a festival.'

That certainly did not sound like the tolerance Showcross Gee had talked about. Billy grimaced.

'Maybe the top banana here doesn't want any competition. That's

often the way of it among the devout.'

Reave covered the microphone with his hand. 'Any ideas?'

'Tell him the ship's busted, and if we don't land, we'll crash into the pyramid.'

Reave spoke into the mike. 'Our ship has been badly damaged in an encounter with a disrupter. We have to land. I say again, we are damaged and have to land.'

There was another long pause. Then the reply came. 'R1009, you have permission to land.'

'Thank you, Palanaque ground.'

Reave grinned and handed the mike back to the nearest crewman. 'Take her down, right in front of the pyramid, if you please.'

The R1009 slowly circled. The four underside-mounted spotlights that were still intact probed down into the Palanaque darkness, crossing lush parkland and the roofs of geometric single-story buildings, and closed on the Great Pyramid with a definite inevitability. In front of the pyramid there was a wide area of hewn white stone, a plaza with more steps of its own leading up to it. One of the crew members glanced at Reave, and Reave nodded.

'That looks like our spot.'

Unfortunately, the plaza was crowded with people, presumably out celebrating Cha'a.

'Just float overhead, holding a steady position. I'm afraid we're going to have to break up the festivities.'

Close up, the pyramid proved to be exceptionally large, the equivalent of fifty or so stories. The R1009 hung over the plaza at about half its height, a giant, battered silver cigar with four beams of light stabbing down. At first the people on the plaza just stared, as though mesmerized by the visitation. It did not seem to occur to them that the ship might be preparing to come down.

Reave looked down at the situation and then turned to the crewman who was waiting on his orders. 'Start slowly taking her down. Let's show them what we mean to do.'

The R1009 started to descend. The people on the plaza seemed to get the message, and those directly beneath the ship began to back away.

The radio crackled into irate life. 'R1009, this is Palanaque ground. You cannot land at the point you are approaching. I repeat, you cannot land at the point you intend.'

Reave held out his hand for the microphone. 'We're coming down. We have no more power. R1009 out.'

A phalanx of soldiers or militia in white kilts and tunics and carrying long batons cut through the crowd and then formed a square in the center of the plaza. The square quickly expanded to become a

growing cordon, herding the celebrants away from the area where the airship would touch down. When everyone was clear below, one of the crew members cut in the mooring beams; like radiant, green fingers, they drew the R1009 to the ground.

Reave hurried back to where the others were waiting. 'We seem to have gained ourselves a reception committee. They don't look to be anything more than spear throwers, but it's good to be careful. We haven't endeared ourselves to anyone here so far. What I suggest is, as soon as the ramp's down, we walk out with our weapons in full view in a discreet show of force.' He glanced back to where Showcross Gee still waited with the other metaphysicians. 'If, of course, that meets with your approval.'

Showcross Gee nodded. 'I see no harm in an initial show of force if Palanaque is being difficult. There must be no violence, however. No violence, under any circumstances.'

'If we're attacked, we reserve the right to return fire. I think you'll find that in the contracts.' Reave was getting heartily sick of Showcross Gee and his detachment.

The ramp lowered, and the main port slid open. By the time the ship touched down, the seven contract warriors were ready. They stood in the port bay with their weapons either cradled in their arms or down at their sides. As soon as the port was fully open, they advanced with purposeful strides and grim expressions. But the soldiers of Palanaque did not look like any particular threat. They were built more for ceremony than for speed, their short, pleated kilts and sleeveless tunics as spotless as the metaphysicians' bodysuits. Their only weapons were polished ten-foot batons, like double-sized pool cues. They might be good for crowd control on a religious holiday, but Billy's multiplex alone was capable of taking out the whole phalanx in under a minute. Stent, in his battle suit, could probably do the job in half the time.

The seven halted at the bottom of the ramp. They had taken only one step out onto the stones of Palanaque when what wasclearly an authority figure pushed through the cordon of soldiers with the attitude of a man who liked to be obeyed. His costume was a more lavish version of that worn by the soldiers with the batons. His kilt reached to his ankles, and instead of the simple sleeveless tunic, he wore a long white surcoat with sun and moon symbols worked into the fabric in gold. It was unclear whether he was a priest or a military officer. For all Reave knew he was a combination of the two.

Billy leaned close to the Minstrel Boy. 'I think this is our local bigwig.'

The Minstrel Boy grunted. 'Probably the first of many.'

'Which one of you is Reave Mekonta?'

Reave took a step forward. 'I am.'

The local bigwig airily gestured toward the R1009. 'This thing has to be removed from here. You have not only landed here illegally, but you have placed your aircraft on one of the most sacred areas of the Holy Reality. This alone would be cause enough for me to have you arrested for Grand Sacrilege.'

As he uttered the word "arrest," Billy hefted the multiplex in silent indication that arresting them might not be as easy as it sounded. Reave folded his arms.

'The ship is a wreck. It can't be moved without extensive repairs.'

Renatta stepped up beside him. 'And who might you be, anyway? You seem to be giving out a lot of orders. Are you in charge here?'

The local bigwig drew himself up to his full height. 'I am Dass-el-Hame. I am the Elevated Palarch of the Holy Reality of Palanaque, and I'm telling you that that aircraft has to be removed. It is an affront to the sacred power of the Great Pyramid.'

'I fear we're running into a bureaucratic deadlock,' Blaisdell muttered to the Minstrel Boy.

'So what else is new?'

The Elevated Palarch was not finished. 'There is also the matter of your weapons. There can be no energy or projectile weapons in the Holy Reality. I must insist that you surrender them.'

It was Stent who answered. 'We are contract warriors, and you take our weapons at your peril.'

The Minstrel Boy wondered how exactly anyone could take either Stent's or Jet Ace's weapons, seeing as how they werebuilt directly into their bodies. For the metal men to lay down their arms would be a matter of major surgery.

The Elevated Palarch inflated his chest. 'I will give you exactly one minute to hand over your armaments.'

Reave looked around at the others. Billy shrugged. If it came to a firefight, they were ready. He could not quite believe that Dass-el-Hame was dumb enough to actually push his ultimatum, although Billy had spent a lifetime being regularly surprised by the stupidity of those in authority. Some of the local hoplites seemed to share his feelings. Although they still stood at rigid attention, many of those in the front line of the cordon looked decidedly unhappy at the direction events seemed to be taking

Fortunately, before the minute was up, a distraction put the inevitable violence on hold. The first sign was the glow of torches, which burned with strange aquamarine flames, coming up the steps that led to the plaza in front of the Great Pyramid. Renatta glanced at Reave.

'Now what?'

'Who the hell knows, in a place like this?'

Some kind of procession seemed to be coming toward the airship. A murmuring arose in the crowd beyond the line of soldiers and grew rapidly into a full-voiced chant.

'Laud and magnify!'

'Laud and magnify!'

'Laud and magnify the blessed Name!'

'Laud and magnify the blessed Name of Parshew-a-Thar, beloved Master of the Holy Reality!'

Clay Blaisdell grimaced. 'So the top dog is coming to take a look at us.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned. 'That's what I always say: If you want to get results, go to the top.'

The crowd was parting, and Dass-el-Hame ordered his men to step aside. The beloved Master of the Holy Reality came with considerable pomp and circumstance and a retinue suitable for one who had his followers believing that he was the next best thing to a god. First there was a quartet of cherubic small boys in white surplices, swinging brass censers and laying a pall of sickly-sweet perfumed smoke. The small boys were followed by eight young women in dresses of wispy, pale blue silk, playing barls and tambourines and strewing the path with fresh rose petals. Parshew-a-Thar himself was carried in a litter, borne on the broad bare shoulders of six identical, body-beautiful nefrites with blue skin and white-blond hair, who must have been specially tailored for their job. The litter was luxuriously carved and finished in gold leaf. The backrest and canopy were shaped in the form of a towering mythical beast, a winged thing whose pinions folded protectively around the occupant. The beloved Master of the Holy Reality reclined languidly on a pile of silk cushions. His left hand was buried in a bowl of sparkling gems that presumably were charging him up with cosmic crystal energy.

The Master came as something of a surprise. He was young and very small, hardly the godlike figure they had expected. He seemed slack-faced and epicene, not much more than a pouting, petulant child with staring eyes that were pale and dark-ringed from some precocious debauchery and a tiny rosebud mouth that seemed to be set in a pout of permanent discontent. A blue silk toga was wrapped around a chubby pink body that obviously took no exercise and had been formed by a life of absolute indulgence.

'Laud and magnify the blessed Name of Parshew-a-Thar, beloved Master of the Holy Reality.'

Renatta looked at Reave in amazement. 'That spoiled-looking brat is the holy of holies?'

'So it would seem.'

'Damn.'

The nefrites lowered the litter to the flagstones. Parshew-a-Thar regarded the airship as though he had only just noticed it and it had come as an unpleasant surprise.

'What is that thing doing in front of our pyramid?'

The Master had a high-pitched, querulous voice that was perfectly suited to the willful baby face. It was accompanied by strange birdlike gestures of his hands, which added a measure of inhuman weirdness to the pampered petulance. Since he was addressing no one in particular none of the seven felt the need to answer him. It was left to a nervous Dass-el-Hame to explain the presence of the airship.

'They crash-landed here. They claim it's the last ship out of Krystaleit before it was destroyed.'

'We want it moved. We can't have that thing in front of our pyramid.'

The Minstrel Boy wondered how it must feel to be able to talk about a pyramid as one's own personal property.

Dass-el-Hame bowed low. Billy could imagine that he was probably sweating.

'They claim it can't be moved.'

'Of course it can be moved. Bring epsilons and ropes. They can haul it away. If we can build a pyramid, we can certainly remove an unsightly airship.'

Dass-el-Hame bowed low. 'Of course, blessed Master. It will be done at once.'

'There is also the matter of their weapons.'

'It has been explained to them that such weapons are forbidden in the Holy Reality. They have been ordered to surrender them, but they seem unwilling to comply.'

Parshew-a-Thar dismissed the problem with one of his quick birdlike gestures. As far as he was concerned, the answer was patently obvious. 'Punish them.'

Dass-el-Hame bowed again. He had the weighed-down stoop of a man who was faced with the prospect of punishing seven heavily armed combat veterans when backed up only by a bunch of guys with oversized pool cues. Reave could feel for him, but it really was not Reave's problem. Under no circumstances wan he going to give up his pistols.

Parshew-a-Thar was once again staring resentfully at the R1009. 'How did this thing become damaged?'

Reave decided that it was time to step into the conversation. 'We had a close encounter with a disrupter.'

The Master's head turned sharply. He looked directly at Reave for the first time. Again there was something birdlike about this

movement. 'A disrupter? We want to hear about a disrupter. We are very interested in disrupters.'

Reave knew it was time to deal. 'What about our weapons?'

Before the Master could answer, the metaphysicians, led by Showcross Gee, emerged from the airship.

'Greetings, Parshew-a-Thar.'

Parshew-a-Thar looked around angrily, and his voice went up half an octave. 'We don't want these people in our domain! Have them removed!'

Showcross Gee raised a calming hand. He suddenly seemed a much more authoritative figure than the blessed Master.

'Parshew-a-Thar, we are the twenty-seven metaphysicians of Krystaleit, and under the Common Bonds laid down by Stafford Pardee, the First Master, we claim tolerance and the right and facilities to continue our work.'

The Master turned to Dass-el-Hame. 'Can they do this to us? '

'I believe that they are within their rights, blessed Name.'

It was clearly an impasse. The seven and their weapons were suddenly forgotten. Parshew-a-Thar seemed to feel exceedingly threatened by the metaphysicians. While he played at being God, the metaphysicians explored the deep and dangerous wild places on the other side of the mind.

'I will say it once again, Parshew-a-Thar. We claim our rights under the Common Bonds.'

The blessed Name squirmed on his cushions. 'You come here and land your ugly flying machine right in front of our beautiful pyramid and — '

'We claim our rights, Parshew-a-Thai.'

Dass-el-Hame leaned close to the Mjister. 'It might be as well to discuss this in private, Holy One.'

The Master saw the merit in the suggestion and quickly gestured to the nefrites. The litter poles were lifted to their broad blue shoulders.

'Follow us,' Parshew-a-Thar snapped at Showcross Gee.

The small boys swung their censers, the girls banged their tambourines and strewed their petals, and the procession, with the metaphysicians bringing up the rear, proceeded up the Great Pyramid, finally disappearing into a dark rectangular entrance on something like the twentieth floor.

Reave faced Dass-el-Hame. 'So what happens to us in the meantime? I don't want to break up the party, but we've been through a lot, and we're tired and hungry.'

Beside him, the Minstrel Boy muttered something under his breath about needing a drink.

Dass-el-Hame's relief at finding a way out was like the sun coming up. 'I will escort you to my residence, where your needs will be taken care of.'

'What about the ship?'

Dass-el-Hame looked nervously apologetic, as though he expected another confrontation. 'The epsilons will have to move it. It has been ordered. There is no way that it can remain here during Cha'a.'

Reave shrugged. 'What the hell, move it if you want. I think the point's been made. Just try not to damage it too much.'

The Elevated Palarch was a very big man around Palanaque, or else a large section of the population lived like kings. His residence was a spacious single-story villa in the Egyptian style, built around a central courtyard and a pool. The walls, faced with ice-blue and magenta marble, were half-obscured by a jungle of lush tropical vegetation. Foxfire and moonglo drifted among the heavy green leaves, undulating like sensual, glowing ghosts. Flame insects flared briefly around fleshy, luxurious orchids. More lights shone up through the tinted waters of the pool and played over the dancing cascade of the central fountain. Crystal wind chimes tinkled softly, long silk prayer banners stirred softly in a lazy breeze, and there was a hint of perfume in the air.

As they walked through the entryway and out into the courtyard, Dass-el-Hame spread his hands in a gesture of mock deprecation. 'Welcome to my humble home.'

Reave let out a low whistle. 'Some spread.'

Renatta stooped down beside the pool and scooped up a little water. 'I think maybe I could live here.'

Dass-el-Hame maintained an extended household. It seemed that the religious beliefs of Palanaque did not exclude the existence of a large servant/slave class. The Elevated Palarch had a particular taste for petite, dark-haired house girls with blank almond eyes who seemed to have no other motivation in their lives except to cater fawningly to his every whim. He indicated them as though they were simply an extension of his property.

'If there's anything that you want, you only have to ask. Anything at all.'

The Minstrel Boy suspected that the house girls were stepfords Stepfords were socially unacceptable, if not illegal, in most ra tional settlements because their creation involved irreversible brain surgery and a considerably shortened life span. There was also a clutch of exotics being languidly decorative over on the other side of the pool. The majority were heavily painted young women, but there was also a scattering of pretty teenage boys. It was unclear if they were family, invited guests, or just a concubine collection. They looked up at the

new arrivals with the nervously watchful eyes of those who assume that the intrusion of strangers will be a prelude to trouble, an assumption that was perfectly understandable in the case of the seven armed mercenaries.

Food and wine were brought, along with a fuel charger for the metal men. Those of the seven who could were given a chance to bathe and to exchange their stained and dirty travel clothes for clean saris in various shades of watered silk. Their treatment left them in no doubt that the Elevated Palarch lived right on the top of the hog. The hot baths alone were a revelation. There were five of them, pale pink marble, each large enough for six people. They came with gold accoutrements anda full complement of wet, naked, and exceedingly attentive house girls who frisked in the bubbling water like sleek brown seals. The house girls proved to be so attentive that Renatta started to complain about the fact that in Palamaque servitude appeared to be exclusive to the female gender.

'Seems like these bastards have built themselves a playboy paradise under the cover of their stupid religion.'

Clay Blaisdell's face broke into a smug and lazy grin. 'It don't seem too bad to me. Besides, there were plenty of men among the epsilons who were hauling away the airship. They didn't look half as cheerful as these water babes.'

When the DNA Cowboys, Renatta, and Blaisdell changed their clothes they also had to face the question of what they were going to do with their weapons. Although they were still adamant about not giving them up, it was plainly ridiculous for them to sit around hugging their guns to their chests. Accordingly, the weapons were stacked discreetly in a secluded corner of the courtyard where they were still in sight but hardly obtrusive.

Once his guests had been comfortably settled in, Dass-el-Hame again reminded them that for the moment his home was totally at their disposal, then made his excuses and left to return to the Great Pyramid. With the master gone, the atmosphere of the residence lightened considerably. The house girls splashed in the pool, and even the exotics seemed to take their poses less seriously. One of the painted women, whose body was an arrangement of tangerine and magenta swirls, came over and sat down next to Renatta.

'Perhaps you would like me to color you? I could get my paints. It must be strange to be so plain, so unadorned.'

Renatta raised an eyebrow. 'Honey, I've done some of my best work unadorned.'

'I didn't mean to give offense.'

'Don't worry about it; you didn't.'

'Should I fetch my paints?'

Renatta shook her head. 'Not right now. Maybe later. I just want to relax here and drink some more of this wine.'

'Do you mind if I talk to you?'

'Not in the least.'

'Do you really come from outside the Holy Reality?'

'You better believe it.'

'And you are concubine to all six of those men?'

Renatta laughed out loud. 'Concubine? I ain't no concubine, cutie. I'm a contract warrior just like the rest of them.'

The tangerine and magenta woman's mouth was a small O of surprise. 'A woman can be a warrior in other realities?'

Renatta gave her a long, hard look. 'I don't know how they've got things set up around here, but where I come from, a woman can do any damn thing she wants.'

'Must be very exciting.'

Two of the other painted girls had moved nearer. The Minstrel Boy grinned. Renatta had only just arrived, and she was already fomenting revolution.

'Sometimes it's exciting, but there are other times when it can be hard and brutal.'

Renatta de Luxe had come a long way since she had begged the Minstrel Boy to take her away from the Caverns in the gold submarine.

Dass-el-Hame did not return until past noon on the following day. A glorious pseudosun had come up in a blaze of gold, and the singing and the peals of bells from beyond the walls of the residence indicated that the festival of Cha'a was still in full swing. When the Elevated Palarch returned, he seemed anything but festive. He glared acidly at the half-clad contract warriors who lounged by the pool eating his fruit, drinking his wine, and progressively going native.

'Your employers can be very persuasive.'

Reave hitched up his sari and got to his feet, 'So what's the story? Is the meeting over? Are we staying here?' He was determined not to treat the man as anything other than an equal despite the grandiose title.

Dass-el-Hame sighed. He looked as though only exhaustion was stopping him from being exceedingly angry. 'In his wisdom, my beloved Master has granted the metaphysicians of Krystaleit sanctuary in this settlement. They will be free to remain here for as long as they like, and they will be provided with the resources to continue their research.'

Reave raised an eyebrow. 'You don't seem too happy about this. Worried they might cause a few changes in your snug little social

system?'

For a moment it looked as if Dass-el-Hame was going to tell Reave exactly how worried and unhappy he was, but then a lifetime as a courtier, with all its complex intrigue and guardeddiplomacy, asserted itself. He contented himself with pursing his lips. He looked as though he were sucking a lemon. 'I don't question the wisdom.'

'And what about us? Have we been granted sanctuary, too?'

'You are still under contract. Your employers require that you remain.' The Elevated Palareh eyed the weapons stacked in the comer of the courtyard. 'They seem to feel that you are the temporal end of their leverage, the hard fulcrum, so to speak.'

Reave half smiled. So Showcross Gee and his bunch were not so spiritual that they wouldn't stoop to at least a covert threat of violence to get what they wanted.

Dass-el-Hame caught the smile and went quickly on. 'You will remain here as my guests until more permanent quarters can be arranged.'

From his expression, it was clear that the extended hospitality was something else that gave him no pleasure at all.

The first few days were a novelty, but as that wore down, time started to blur into the languidly sensual rhythm of lotus life. For the Minstrel Boy, it was like nothing more than the routine gratification of the Caverns from which he had fled what seemed like a century before. The only real difference was that Palanaque had days and nights, whereas the Caverns had been shrouded in a continuous soft gloom. Palanaque even had a little mock weather system. One afternoon a soft novelty rain had fallen over the city. Aside from minor interruptions of that kind, there was nothing but the slow torpor of mindless hedonism.

Initially the Minstrel Boy was not too bothered by the enforced idleness. After the ducking and diving they had been forced to go through since their reunion at the Voice in the Wilderness, a period of doing absolutely nothing was far from unwelcome. But the Minstrel Boy could not keep himself from thinking ahead. A time would come when the seven of them would become bored with the luxury and lethargy and start hankering for some action. The inclination would be to cut loose from Palanaque and move on. He wondered how the metaphysicians would take that when the time came.

Jet Ace was the first to chafe at the relentless ease. He still had his dreams of becoming a legendary hero. He took to flying by himself at the far end of the valley, away from the city. The Minstrel Boy would not have been the least bit surprised if one day he simply failed to come back from one of his solitary excursions, simply deserted into the nothings. Yet each day he returned. Itseemed that Jet Ace's sense

of duty was stronger than his ambition. The Minstrel Boy had no ambition at all. He simply played among the painted women and wondered what was going to happen next.

Billy was also showing signs of the strain of having nothing to do. The Minstrel Boy had noticed that Billy's mental condition seemed to worsen when he had too much time on his hands. In Palanaque there was one refinement that he had never seen in the Caverns, and Billy seemed increasingly to be turning to it as a cure for boredom. It was a kind of short-term discorporation, lasting from a few minutes to almost an hour, from which the subject emerged confused but euphoric. It was referred to as a spiritual outreach, but Billy Oblivion scoffed at that description.

'Hell, it ain't nothing but turning an inversion trick. Back in Utgard they called it doing the Valhalla, and out in the Dumps, it's known as reality jagging. You do whatever your particular thing is, you know? Lobe pressure, tantric exercise, drugs, mantra, whatever. Your body goes limp, and then you wake up sometime later, feeling great, with this stupid grin on your face. The damnedest part is that you can't remember why you feel so good, but you want to do it again real soon.'

Scoff as he might, Billy spent a lot of hours spiritually out-reaching. With a kind of inept junkie cunning, he tried to keep it from the others, but there was not one of the other six who had not come across him sprawled on a bench or propped up against a wall, out there, dead to the world, with his eyes rolled back into his skull. Nobody had said anything, but each hoped that something would turn up to occupy Billy's mind and slow the downward drift.

It was only after five full weeks that something happened to break the perfumed monotony. It was late afternoon, and Dass-el-Hame was not expected to return to the residence until well after dark. While the seven remained his guests, he spent as little time there as possible. So it caused a good deal of consternation among the house girls when he suddenly, without warning, hurried in, flanked by two of his aides. He quickly rounded up the seven contract warriors.

'You will all come with me. Our detectors have picked up an object in the nothings that seems to be coming this way.'

> *As the legend is told, the metaphysicians of Krystaleit made their ultimate breakthrough in the short space of time between the destruction of their city and the overthrow of their refuge at Palanaque. This is yet another point*

where the oral tradition takes its leave of what is plausible. Metaphysicians all over the Damaged World had worked for nine centuries on the problem of nonreversible discorporation and a malleable afterlife. It scarcely seems possible that after such lengthy and concerted effort, the goal should be achieved by a handful of individuals under the most stressful and makeshift conditions in just a matter of weeks. A much more likely explanation is that the ultimate breakthrough was made much earlier but its mechanics were not widely employed until the days immediately before the Final Cataclysm. If this is indeed true, it says a lot about the metaphysicians' faith in their discovery.

— Pressdia Vishnaria

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'So what do you make of it?'

'I'm damned if I know. These lizardbrain detectors are notoriously deceptive. On face value, it looks like either a very big vessel or a mass of people with synced SGs.'

'It's moving very slowly.'

'That's what's making me lean toward the mass of people.'

'Like an army?'

'I didn't say that.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy stood in front of the hemispheric 3D screen, staring intently at a small trailing blip of green light at the bottom left of the transparent bowl. Behind them, Parshew-a-Thar and a good part of his holy court looked on anxiously. The Minstrel Boy glanced back. That bunch became incredibly anxious when confronted by anything from the outside world. He could only assume that they were terrified that something would come along to rupture their elaborate fantasy. There was no missing just how elaborate their fantasy had become over the centuries. There were at least two dozen of the religious hierarchy crowded behind their beloved Master. Their costumes were little short of outrageous. Dass-el-Hame was among the most conservative in his white and gold. There were two who looked like ancient Aztecs in brilliantly multicolored robes made from hundreds of tiny iridescent bird feathers and plumed headdresses so tall that the wearers had to lower thdr heads to clear the ceiling of the communications center.

The communications center was another part of the fantasy. It was a cool, austere underground bunker that looked more liice a burial chamber than a vital link with the outside world. Its equipment was faced in ivory Bakelite with very few visible controls. It relied almost totally on prox panels that were activated by passes of the hands, which gave the normal working of the place a quasi-magical air. Even the screen in front of them was an oversized approximation of the traditional crystal ball. The Minstrel Boy hated the whole setup. He felt that only those who were spiritually insecure in the extreme needed to cloak honest hardware with mysticism.

In addition to Palanaque's religious hierarchy, Showcross Gee and three other metaphysicians also waited and watched. They looked almost as concerned as the Palanaquii, and their anxiety was a little more understandable. Having had one city shot out from underneath them already, it was hard for them to maintain the face of tranquillity when an unidentified something appeared in the nothings.

'So what is your considered opinion?'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy turned and faced Showcross Gee. 'It's not much to go on.'

'But you must have some ideas as to the nature of this object.'

'We have a couple of guesses, nothing more.'

'So tell us your guesses.'

The Minstrel Boy looked to Reave to do the talking, but Reave deferred to him. 'You're the one who knows all about this shit.'

The Minstrel Boy took a deep breath and faced the preposterous gathering. 'The way that we see it, it's most likely a mass of people, all with synced individual stasis generators, either moving on foot or riding lizards.'

Parshew-a-Thar's voice practically squeaked with anxiety. 'Isn't that the way the raiders travel?'

The Minstrel boy nodded. 'It is.'

'You think these are raiders?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. 'There's no way of telling. I tend to doubt it. We have to assume that the large force was destroyed when they blew up Krystaleit. It seems unlikely that another force could assemble so quickly.'

That did not do much to allay their fears.

'But it could be a raiding force?'

'Anything's possible.'

'What can we do if it *is* a raiding force?'

'Off the cuff, I'd say that we were screwed.'

The beloved Master looked as though he were going to explode. As a demigod, he was not accustomed to the MinstrelBoy's direct approach. He was aflutter with bird gesture; 'What did you say?'

There were angry murmurings among the courtiers.

The Minstrel Boy raised his hands. 'Let's all calm down a minute. All that's happened so far is that we've spotted an object in the nothings. For all we know it's a party of harmless refugees.'

Parshew-a-Thar was petulant. 'There is no room here for refugees.'

'That's hardly the point.'

'What is the point?'

The Minstrel Boy was becoming a little impatient with the beloved Master's falsetto voice and patent stupidity. 'I think that the point is that you need to stop panicking and make some preparations to deal with the arrival of this object, whatever it might be.'

Showcross Gee attempted to restore some measure of reason into the meeting. 'Do you have any specific suggestions?'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at Reave, who took over.

'The obvious first move is to put your military on some sort of limited alert. I assume that you have a functioning militaiy over and above the ceremonial guard.'

Parshew-a-Thar was taking serious exception to the manners of the outsiders. His baby face was a mottled purple, and he seemed to be having difficulty restraining a temper tantrum. 'Of course we have a military. I will relay your suggestion to General Zeum.'

'They'll have to be armed with something a bit more substantial than oversized pool cues.'

Parshew-a-Thar glared venomously at Reave and the Minstrel Boy. 'Since you seem to have such little confidence in our capability to defend ourselves, I see that I will have to arrange a demonstration for you and your companions. I will order General Zeum to parade the entire Grand Army at high noon tomorrow in full battle array.' He turned to a nearby courtier. 'You will implement that immediately.' The courtier produced a scriber and tablet. He made a quick note and then hurried from the communications center. Parshew-a-Thar glanced back to Reave. 'Is there anything else?'

'Nothing else we can do except keep monitoring the progress of whatever this thing is.'

The beloved Master made a dismissive gesture. 'In that case, this audience is at an end.'

He waved for his nefrites. As he was borne away in his litter, Reave muttered under his breath, 'Yeah, it's been real.'

The following high noon found the seven out in the bright sun, on the flat, glaring white roof of one of the twin gate towers. They were dressed in their freshly cleaned travel clothes, and their weapons were held in plain sight. Even Lister Stent had made some effort for the martial occasion: All through the night a half dozen house girls had climbed all over him, sanding and polishing his ancient armor to the point where he gleamed in the sun. The seven were accompanied by Dass-el-Hame and a number of his aides. Showcross Gee and the other three metaphysicians who had been present in the communications center were there, too. They seemed to constitute the committee that dealt with the outside world while the other twenty-three were holed up in the Great Pyramid doing their mysterious research work. General Zeum was also on the roof. It was hard to gauge the metal men's response, but the remainder of the seven took an instant and open dislike to the general. General Zeum was a tall, smugly good-looking man decked out in a white tunic and cloak and gold Romanesque body armor. He appeared to be so fundamentally pleased with himself that he was totally impervious to outside suggestion. His response to all comment was to flash his perfect teeth in a slightly patronizing smile and assure whoever had spoken that they had nothing to worry about.

A wide, straight palm-lined boulevard led from the city gates directly to the base of the Great Pyramid. The Grand Army had been

assembled at the foot of the pyramid. From there, they would march in formations down the boulevard, out of the gates, and on to the flatlands beside the river, where they would perform simulated combat maneuvers. The term 'Grand Army' was an unashamed exaggeration, considering that the force was little more than a thousand strong, although it did seem perfectly in keeping with what the seven had observed of the characters of General Zeum and the beloved Master.

A braying fanfare of trumpets and a thunder of kettledrums announced the opening of the show. The Grand Army started down the boulevard in half-time lockstep. The crowds that thronged both sides of the route had brought flags, bells, and noisemakers, almost certainly left over from the Cha'a festivities, and they made an atonal counterpoint to the slow crash of drums. As the ranks of white tunics came closer to the gates, looks of complete disbelief came over the faces of the seven. Billy, Reave, and Renatta hurried to where Zeum was standing, looking proudly down at his men. Reave faced him angrily.

'What the hell is going on?'

Zeum regarded him calmly. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Reave pointed down at the marching men. 'That's what I'm talking about. These men are supposed to be in combat trim.'

Zeum looked blank. 'They are.'

'You're crazy.'

'Please don't take that tone with me.'

Renatta was right behind Reave. 'These men aren't fitted out for combat.'

Zeum's impeccable manners were wilting a little. 'Indeed they are, young woman. They have been issued spear blades, and they carry short swords and aluminum shields. They are more than ready for combat.'

Renatta was even more outraged than Reave. 'Have you ever seen combat?'

'Of course not. This is a peaceful settlement with deep roots in its religion.'

'Well, we've seen too damn much combat, and let me tell you that this so-called Grand Army won't stand a rat's chance if that blip turns out to be a party of raiders.'

At that moment Dass-el-Hame joined the arguing group. He was quickly followed by Showcross Gee.

'What seems to be the problem here?'

Again Reave pointed to the ranks of men who were marching out under the archway and through the open gates of the city.

'It's this army of yours that's the problem. They might be okay if you were having a war with the Trojans, but if raiders do come out of the nothings, they're going to be up against projectile guns and heat rays. They're going to be creamed in the first couple of minutes.'

'I believe it was the Minstrel Boy who said it was highly unlikely that there were raiders in the nothings.'

Reave scowled.'I hate to see a whole city pinning its survival on what the Minstrel Boy thinks is likely or unlikely. What harm would it do to forget all this ancient bullshit and go to Stuff Central for some real weapons? Then, if there is trouble, at least you'll stand a fighting chance,'

Dass-el-Hame stiffened and shook his head.'That's quite out of the question. It would go against our most deeply implanted principles.'

'Principles can get kind of irrelevant when the vultures are picking out your eyes.'

Dass-el-Hame paled a little. Even then, though, he was not about to give ground.

'In the unlikely event that we were willing to do such a thing and the beloved Master gave his consent, I seriously doubt that it would be possible. There have always been the most basic blocks built into our stuff receivers to prevent the creation of such material. I don't think that they'd even accommodate the templates for advanced weapons. The Founding Master was quite obsessive about these things, and the prohibition on weapons is built into the very fabric of the settlement. It might well take weeks to reprogram the stuff cages.'

Reave sighed. 'Then we're just going to have to hope that that thing in the nothings is just a column of refugees.'

He turned and walked slowly to the edge of the gate tower. Out on the flat grasslands, the Grand Army had formed itself into fighting phalanxes. Spears with bright polished tips bristled through the shield wall as two of the solid squares advanced on each other, executing a perfectly rehearsed textbook maneuver. It was a grand but completely irrelevant spectacle.

'Yeah, they'd be great against a bunch of Trojans.'

'Aren't you being a little hard on these people?'

Showcross Gee had come up behind him. Reave eyed him coldly.

'And?'

'The introduction of advanced weapons could have a disastrous effect on these people's social structure.'

'So would fifty heavily armed raiders.'

'It's hardly likely, though, is it?'

'I don't know what's likely, just what's possible.'

'Would you like to see a man like Zeum in charge of a really effective fighting force?'

'It's hardly my problem.'

'It might become your problem.'

Reave raised an eyebrow. 'What exactly are you trying to say to me?'

'If the Palanaquii had advanced weapons, they might decide that they were in a position to expel us from the settlement. It's very important right now that we remain where we are.'

'Operating according to strict self-interest, are we?'

'Our work is very near its completion. We must not be interrupted at this point.'

'Did you stop for a moment and consider what it might mean if that really is a party of raiders coming in from the nothings?'

Showcross Gee stroked his chin. He seemed to be weighing Reave's loyalty before he answered. He glanced around to make sure that they were not being overheard.

'We have discussed this. We estimate that in the event of an attack, we could seal ourselves in the Great Pyramid. It could withstand a lengthy siege.'

'And the Palanaquii can go hang?'

Out on the flatlands the Grand Army of Palanaique had formed itself into four spear squares of equal sizes. They were circling each other in a stately martial gavotte. Showcross Gee watched them for almost a minute before he turned to face Reave.

'The work in which we are engaged is infinitely more important than the survival or otherwise of this odd little settlement.'

Reave nodded. 'Just so long as we understand each other.'

Showcross Gee's eyes met Reave's. 'I think we've always understood each other.'

'Perhaps you 'd like to give me an idea what this work of yours is all about.'

Showcross Gee shook his head. 'Even if I did, you wouldn't understand me.'

'You could try me.'

'I don't think so.'

Reave considered slugging the metaphysician. Showcross Gee's superior certainty had become something more than a simple irritant. He was starting to ball his fist when Jet Ace suddenly provided a face-saving distraction by taking off in a roar of rocket exhaust. He climbed high and then swooped down in a steep power dive. He skimmed low over the heads of the Palanaquii hoplites and then pulled up and climbed again. He made a wide turn, then came in for a second pass. It had to be said in favor of the Grand Army that they did not falter in theface of the metal man's antics. They did not scatter and run but simply went on with what they were doing.

Showcross Gee looked at Reave. 'What does he think he's doing?'

Reave shrugged.'What can I tell you? He's crazy and getting crazier.'

'I don't understand how you can work so calmly with an individual who is so unstable.'

Reave grinned. 'I guess there are some things that you'll never understand, either.'

Showcross Gee scowled and said nothing.

Later that night there was a tense emergency meeting beside Dass-el-Hame's pool. The exotics and house girls had taken one look at the faces of the contract warriors and made themselves scarce. The games were on hold, and life was suddenly very serious. Billy, who seemed to have been shocked into normalcy by the spectacle of General Zeum's toy army, said it all in two sentences: 'This place is beyond weird. We got to get the hell out of here, right now.'

Renatta and the Minstrel Boy nodded as one.

'He's right. We should pull out before it gets any more bizarre. We all saw those clowns marching about this afternoon. If anything goes down here, we're on our own.'

Reave was not in quite such a hurry. 'We need to think about this.'

Blaisdell looked at him in surprise. 'What's there to think about? It's time to be moving on, and that's that. You can't argue about that, Reave.'

Reave walked over to the edge of the pool and looked down at the water. It glittered with reflections of foxfire, moonglo, and the flame insects. The fountain splashed, and behind him the wind chimes rang in the night breeze. The place seemed so peaceful that it was hard to conceive of it as maybe being on the edge of destruction.

'All I'm saying is that we need to think about it. This place might prove to be a haven. We've got no idea of what conditions might be like in the other realities.'

Billy was not buying it. 'We've got no idea what's coming out of the nothings.'

'We'd look pretty stupid if we lit out for some place a wholelot worse and the thing in the nothings turned out to be nothing more than a bunch of refugees.'

Blaisdell snorted. 'We'd look pretty stupid if it turned out to be a bunch of raiders, armed to the teeth and barking crazy, with only the seven of us to stand against them.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'He's got a point there. My mother didn't raise no sitting duck.'

Up to that point Lister Stent had not spoken. He and Jet Ace had been standing on the sidelines while the others argued. Now he caught

everyone's attention with a metallic clearing of his throat. 'I'm afraid that this whole conversation is quite academic.'

Everyone except Jet Ace looked at him in amazement.

'Say what?'

'We cannot leave Palanaque. We'd be in contractual breach.'

'So? Who's going to stop us?'

Stent raised a steel arm. The gesture was almost apologetic. 'Unfortunately I would.'

Reave raised an eyebrow. 'And what would you want to go and do that for?'

'I'd have no choice.'

Renatta was shaking her head. 'What are you talking about?'

Stent did his best to be calming. 'Perhaps I should explain something. I am a very powerful and dangerous weapon and virtually indestructible. Because of this, like all of my kind, I don't have the luxury of choice and emotion that is available to you unadapted humans. Because of my strength I have been conditioned from my birth and creation to absolute obedience to authority. It is reinforced by chemical blockers. If I disobey a legitimate order, I start to vomit. After that, I go into convulsions, and finally I die.'

Renatta did not look particularly concerned with Stent's problem. 'So you stay. We don't have no conditioning to keep us here.'

'I'm afraid it's not as simple as that. I have been ordered to stop any of you from deserting.'

Reave slowly let out his breath. 'And when was that order given?'

'Soon after we left Krystaleit.'

'So Showcross Gee screwed us.'

'He did indeed.'

Billy thrust his hands deep into his pockets. 'So what do we do now?'

Reave once again stared at the reflections on the surface of the pool. 'All we can do is wait and see what pops out of the nothings. Once we know what we're facing, we can make a decision.'

For the next five days Reave and the Minstrel Boy made regular trips to the communications center to monitor the blip on the detector screen. Although it was still moving very slowly, if the lizardbrain could be believed, it was definitely moving in their direction.

'Can you guess at an ETA on this thing?'

The Minstrel Boy did not look happy. 'It's real hard to tell, but I can't see whatever it is taking more than a week to get here.'

On the fifth day of monitoring the object in the nothings it became plain that even the Minstrel Boy's prediction of when the thing would make realityfall had been overcautious.

'There's no mistake now. The signals have been too consistent.

We'll know all about this sucker in the next sixteen hours.'

'It'll be here?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. The pale green glow of the screen in the otherwise darkened room cast sinister shadows across his face.

'It'll be here.'

Reave's voice was very quiet. 'Damn.'

The Minstrel Boy turned away from the bowl-shaped screen. The messengers were already on their way to inform the beloved Master and General Zeum.

'You worried?'

Reave shook his head. 'I don't know. Maybe we've been watching this thing for too long.'

'All we can do is wait and see.'

'That's the worst part.'

Reave looked around. The communications center looked even more like a tomb. Most of the staff members were standing in a group on the far side of the detector room watching the two of them nervously. They could easily have passed for mourners.

'So what do we do now? Hang around here and wait for whatever it is to arrive?'

'I don't see what else we can do. I'd like to be around when the thing hits. It's most probably a false alarm, but I figure we need as much time as we can get to start motivating.'

Reave did not seem particularly enthusiastic about waiting in the communication center for the object to arrive. 'Motivating?'

'Motivating our collective ass.'

'What about Stent?'

The Minstrel Boy pursed his lips. 'We're going to have to sneak past Stent.'

'We sure as hell can't go through him.'

'That's a fact.'

Reave slumped into a chair, resigned to the wait. 'Okay, so let it come.'

'It's going to. Don't worry about that.'

Palanaque had a single advantage. Its stasis field was shaped so that anyone or anything approaching it would be tunneled around and forced to enter only at a single point, the break in the mountains at the very end of the valley, the farthest point from the city. Although its passengers had not known it at the time, the R1009 had come in that way. The entry point was right beside the upland lake that was the source of what turned into a wide river by the time it flowed past the city and eventually ran out into the nothings over the spectacular waterfall at the lower end of the valley.

The instant General Zeum received the word, he was galvanized. His reaction might not have been inspired, but it was certainly swift. A detachment of 150 hoplites with spears and shields, attendant epsilons, a malfunctioning portable communicator, and supplies for two days were dispatched up the valley. The first leg of their journey was by gaily painted riverboat, the kind normally used to provide pleasure trips for the leisure caste. When they were close to the rapids below the lake, they would disembark and make the remainder of the journey on foot. Overall, the trip would take them some five hours. Once in place they would stand guard at the edge of the nothings and wait for whatever arrived. Reave and the Minstrel Boy had long since given up trying to advise Zeum, so they simply kept their own council and watched the screen.

The wait took on the feeling of a vigil. After a couple of hoursRenatta and Blaisdell arrived. They were both a little drunk, but they had brought an epsilon with them, carrying a basket containing food and a number of jugs of the raw local wine. They had their weapons with them, and they seemed to have come to stay for the duration. The epsilon had brought along Reave's pistols and the Minstrel Boy's knife belt and AK 5000 as well as SG portapacs.

'If the moment of truth's on its way, we ought to be ready for it,' Blaisdell explained.

Reave looked approvingly at the equipment and the wine. 'Good looking out. Where's Billy?'

'Oh, he's gone again. No one home there.'

'Fuck him, he's tailing back into his old ways.'

'He's picked a great time for it.'

'He always does. Where are the metal men?'

'They're out in the city someplace. They seemed to feel the need to move around.'

The Minstrel Boy broke the seal on the first jug of wine. The staff of the communication center looked a little askance at their pristine inner sanctum being turned into a party place, but they appeared too intimidated to say anything. The hours passed, and the mysterious blip crawled painfully slowly toward the merge point.

Renatta was the first one to grow angry at the waiting. 'This is like watching paint dry.'

'So don't watch it. Go on getting drunk.'

After eleven and a half hours the object entered Palanaque reality. There was a brief flash on the detector screen as it made the transition.

'This is it. They're here.'

Renatta stared a little wearily at the now-empty screen. 'Do you realize that they probably watched us come in just like this?'

Blaisdell laughed. 'They probably weren't drinking.'

'Maybe they should have been.'

Reave stood up and stretched. 'Let's hope these guys don't cause any more trouble than we did.'

Renatta looked up at him.'How do you know they are guys?'

One of the communication staff members came into the detector room and bowed. 'There's a signal coming through from the company at the lake.'

Reave looked up. 'Can you patch it in here?'

'Easily.'

'Then please do so.'

The technician bowed again and hurried away. Within a matter of seconds the detector room was filled with an urgent voice that was almost drowned in static.

'. . and the nothings have started to glow. . major transition flux is being created.' The static increased, and the voice came through only in brief snatches. '. . something coming through. . can't make. . just shadows against the. . a lot of. .'

The clear voice of a military operator in the city cut in. ' Please say again, Company A. You are breaking up very badly. I repeat, please say again. Check your equipment and say again.'

'. . moving in. . I don't know. . it looks. . hard to. .'

'We are losing you altogether, Company A. Dispatch the runners now. I say again, dispatch the runners now.'

'Holy shit!'

The Minstrel Boy clapped his hands to his ears. The signal was gone, and the room was filled with violent shrieking feedback. It lasted for almost a half minute and then cut out. Thie static returned, but this time there was not even the semblance of a voice. The Minstrel Boy sighed. 'They're off the air.'

Renatta put down the wine jug she had been cradling. Her voice was suddenly sober. 'Do we ask ourselves why?'

The Minstrel Boy stood up. 'I've been trying to avoid doing that, but I haven't found a way around it. I also have this terrible feeling that the best thing we could do would be to go up to that lake and take a look for ourselves.'

Reave looked at him as though he were mad. 'Are you kidding?'

'No, I'm not.' He motioned in the direction of the communication staff. 'But I'd rather not discuss it in front of them. Little pigs often have big ears.'

Reave picked up his jug and stood up. 'So let's go stretch our legs.'

As soon as they were out in the open, the Minstrel Boy started to outline his plan. 'The way I see it, we volunteer to go up the river and see what's going on by the lake.'

'And do we?'

'Sure we do. It's what we do next that counts.'

'And what's that?'

'We'll have two options. If whatever's come out of the nothings proves to be harmless, we come back to the city and spread the good news.'

Blaisdell pushed his fingers through his hair. 'And if it ain't harmless?'

'Then we try and creep through and make it to the nothings.'

'But why go all the way up to that lake? Why don't we just hit the nothings at the nearest point?'

The Minstrel Boy allowed himself a small superior smile. 'Because if you'd check out the stasis field on this place, you'd know that it's one of those spiral fold deals. The only way in or out is through a quite small access window up by the lake. '

Reave shook his head. 'I'm not so sure about this.'

The Minstrel Boy halted. 'Listen, it's only just after sunset outside. We would make it before dawn. We can take a boat most of the way.'

Renatta blinked. 'A boat?'

The Minstrel Boy was confident. 'We can get a boat.'

'We can?'

'Sure we can. I figure they'll be about ready to give us anything right about now if we can shed some light on the situation.'

Clay Blaisdell was nodding his agreement. 'The Minstrel Boy's right. If this is a raiding party and they're moving on the city, they won't bother to hide their position. They'll be coming with fire and sword, and we'll see them when they're still miles off.'

Reave sighed. 'I guess you're right. I've got to tell you, though, trekking up that river is the last thing I feel like doing. '

The Minstrel Boy ignored that final objection. 'So we ask for a boat.'

He started toward the Great Pyramid, but Reave caught him by the arm.

'What about Billy?'

The Minstrel Boy had temporarily forgotten their third musketeer.

'Oh, hell. Yes. Billy. .'

Renatta stepped in. 'Clay and I will get Billy. You guys get the boat. We'll meet you at the dock.'

As the Minstrel Boy had predicted, the beloved Master and General Zeum were more than willing to help anyone who wasfoolhardy enough to go upriver and find out what was going on. Forty-five minutes saw Reave and the Minstrel Boy at the river pier closest to the pyramid. A light, fast galley with a prow like a painted sea monster, a single tier of epsilon rowers, and the sleek stylized lines

of racing craft of the Elite was moored there. Torches burned on the canopied quarterdeck, their flames reflecting off the oiled bodies of the rowers. Reave and the Minstrel Boy were, however, a little too preoccupied to spend very long admiring the beauty of the craft. The Minstrel Boy looked anxiously back down the dock.

'Where the hell are the others?'

Reave scowled. 'They're probably still looking for Billy.'

'I swear the bastard's capacity for fucking up increases in direct proportion to the system breaking down. It gets worse, he gets worse.'

'Maybe he's the one who's responsible for it all.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed despite the tension. 'The whole world's an analogue of Billy's rotting psyche?'

'Got to blame someone.'

A further ten minutes brought an end to the waiting but a hardly satisfactory answer. There were just two figures coming down the dock toward them, Renatta and Blaisdell — but no Billy.

'We looked in all the usual places, but there's no sign of him. He could be racked out in any one of a dozen discorp dens.'

Reave glanced at the Minstrel Boy. 'We can't leave Billy behind.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged. 'We've left him behind before. '

Reave looked unhappy. 'Yeah, but this time's different.'

'A bit more terminal?'

'You know what I mean.'

'What do you want to do about it?'

Reave was spared having to come up with an answer, General Zeurn and a squad of his hoplites chose that moment to come marching down the pier. Showcross Gee and Stent were with them. Zeum was his normal unshakable self.

'Are you sure that you wouldn't rather wait for the runners?'

'We'll meet them if they're coming.'

'There's a communications unit aboard.'

'Let's hope we have better luck with this one.'

Zeum ignored the crack. 'Do you want a squad of my men to accompany you?'

Reave shook his head. 'We work better alone.'

'As you will.'

The Minstrel Boy was looking impatient. 'Is there anything else? Can we go aboard now?'

General Zeum gestured toward the galley. 'The boat is at your disposal.'

Showcross Gee took a step forward and spoke for the first time. 'There is one thing.'

Reave's eyes narrowed. He did not like the metaphysician's tone. 'What's that?'

'I'd prefer it if you left your SG portapacs here.'

Reave glanced down at the unit on his belt. 'There's a chance we might need them.'

'Indeed there is — a chance that you might need them to slip away into the nothings and desert. We can't afford to not have you here right now.'

Reave started to bluster, but he could hardly deny that the thought had crossed his mind. 'This is ridiculous. The SGs are a part of our basic equipment.'

'Just hand over the portapacs.'

Reave looked at Stent. 'Are we to suppose that you're here to back him up?'

Stent's expression was impossible to read behind his metal headpiece, but his voice sounded a note of regret. 'I explained how it is.'

Reluctantly, Reave undipped the SG from his belt and handed it over. He indicated that the others should do the same. Stent watched impassively.

'Can we go aboard now?'

'Please, go right ahead.'

As they mounted the gangplank, the Minstrel Boy leaned close to Reave. 'I guess we don't have to feel guilty about leaving Billy behind anymore.'

In addition to the ten epsilon rowers, there was also a helmsman, an overseer/drummer to set the stroke, a lookout on the bow, and an ensign who was in command of the vessel. Once Reave, the Minstrel Boy, Renatta, amd Blaisdell had settled themselves in its stern, the galley was quickly cast off and the epsilons hauled on their oars. The drummer set a steady pace, and the lights of the city slipped away behind them while the four lounged in the stern cushions in most unsoldierly comfort.

The ten rowers quickly developed a healthy rate of knots, particularly since the drummer regularly rose from his bench and, all the time shouting the cadence, encouraged them to greater efforts with a multithonged lash.

The first stage of the journey might have been pleasant, even leisurely, if it had not been for the thought of what they might find at their destination. The carved and painted prow sliced through the dark water, producing white curlicues of foam; the oars rose and fell to the accompaniment of the hypnotic drumbeat and the soft groans of the sweating epsilons. The sky was dark blue velvet and studded with thousands of twinkling pseudostars. A soft breeze blew along the length of the craft. For the first couple of hours the Minstrel Boy was almost able to turn off his apprehension and simply savor the

experience. After two hours, though, as they neared the halfway point, a new anxiety set in. There was no sign of the runners from Company A. If they had been dispatched when the communicator transmission had failed, the boat should have already encountered them. It might have been possible to miss them in the darkness, but with the stem lit by blazing torches, the runners would have undoubtedly seen the boat and signaled.

Reave pushed himself up from the cushions and walked forward along the catwalk between the two lines of rowers to question the lookout. 'Are you absolutely sure that you've seen nothing?'

The lookout, a boy who could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen, vehemently shook his head. 'No, my lord. I've been watching all the time. The ensign would have the skin off my back if I missed anything.'

Reave returned to his companions. 'I don't like this at all. If these newcomers stopped the runners leaving, we can only assume that their intentions are hostile.' He turned to the ensign. 'Is it possible that they took another route?'

The ensign shook his head. 'There is no other route. They would have had to follow the river.'

The Minstrel Boy squinted into the dark. 'So what do we want to do now? It's too late to turn back.'

Reave was also peering into the night. 'All we can do is keep going, taking all possible care.' He called to the lookout. 'If you see anything, boy, anything at all, tell me immediately.'

'Aye, aye, my lord.'

The galley maintained a steady speed for the best part of an hour. Toward the end of that time Reave, the Minstrel Boy, and the ensign were all up in the prow watching for any sign of life. The river had become considerably narrower and ran between steep, rocky banks. The ensign looked warningly at Reave.

'We'll be coming to the rapids very soon.'

'What will we find when we get there?'

'There is a landing stage on the smooth water just below them. We should see the riverboat that brought Company A up here.'

It was only a matter of minutes before the lookout sang out. 'Something in the water up ahead.'

'Does it look like a boat?'

The lookout shook his head. 'No, my lord. If it is, it's burnt and sunk in the shallows.'

Reave scowled. 'I hope to hell you're wrong,' He signaled to the ensign. 'Let's take it slow and easy.'

The ensign motioned to the drummer. 'Stop that racket and reduce the stroke to dead slow.'

The drummer put down his mallets and maintained the slowest possible stroke with silent gestures.

'Douse the stern lights.'

There was a soft hiss as the torches were extinguished. The galley glided forward like a silent ghost. The lookout proved to be absolutely right. The remains of a charred hulk were half-submerged beside the pier, and bodies and debris were floating in the water. The Minstrel Boy felt a cold clutch at his guts. Their worst fears had been realized.

'It's a fucking massacre.'

A conference quickly convened on the quarterdeck.

'This has to be the work of raiders. They must be camped somewhere up by the lake, though why in hell they haven't made a move on the city yet is beyond me.'

'I should get on the communicator.'

The ensign seemed to be waiting for Reave's okay. Reave nodded. 'Yeah, go ahead. Give them the bad news.'

Everyone gathered around the large cumbersome communicator while the ensign coaxed it into life.

'Company B calling Palanaque Central.'

All that came from the small speaker was the familiar crackle of static.

'Company B calling Palanaque Central, acknowledge, please.'

The ensign looked worriedly at Reave. 'I don't seem to be raising them.'

'Keep trying. If you don't get them after five minutes, send out all the relevant information in the hope that they can hear us even if we can't hear them.' Reave glared at no one in particular. 'Why does nothing here work properly?'

The ensign stayed crouched over the set while the others gathered in a tense group.

'So what do we do if the communicator is out? Head down-river and warn them in person?'

Reave shook his head. 'I want to have a closer look at what's out there. I want to know exactly what we're dealing with. The Minstrel Boy and I will go ashore and try to infiltrate their camp.'

The Minstrel Boy started to protest. 'How did I get elected to walk into the jaws of death?'

'You and I can most likely mingle with these raiders in the dark.'

'So can Blaisdell.'

'I prefer to work with you.'

'Thanks a lot.'

'You're welcome.'

Renatta planted her hands on her nips. 'And what are we supposed to do while you two are out playing heroes? Sit here

twiddling our thumbs and waiting?'

'Get the boat out into the middle of the river and be ready to go fast at the first sign of trouble. Give us two hours. If we 're not back by then, take off and warn the city.'

The galley moved up to the pier, and Reave and the Minstrel Boy jumped ashore. They watched as the galley backed up, positioned itself in the middle of the stream, and dropped a light anchor. The rowers skulled lightly to keep it from dragging with the current. Satisfied that everything had been done, Reave and the Minstrel Boy turned and walked purposefully away.

'You know something? I'm not going to forget how you volunteered me for this.'

Reave laughed grimly. 'Let's hope you have lots of time to remember it in.'

A well-trodden path ran away from the pier and then curvedand zigzagged up a steep hillside for over a mile. After a half hour of solid climbing, both men were close to winded.

'We've been living soft for too long.'

'Let's take a break.'

Reave got no argument from the Minstrel Boy, and both men flopped down on the soft turf.

'Goddamn.'

When the Minstrel Boy had caught his breath, he propped himself up on one elbow. 'How long do you figure we should go on following this trail? We've got to be nearing the lake by now.'

Reave looked up at the crest of the hill that still loomed over them. 'I'm assuming that when we get to the top of this hill, we're going to be able to see the lake and probably whatever kind of camp there is. If anyone's got half a brain, they'll have posted pickets out on the road at the hilltop.'

'So we go cross-country from here?'

'Have to. Though I wish I'd seen this country in daylight. We're working on too many blind guesses.'

They got to their feet and, leaving the road, started up the hillside, at times climbing on their hands and knees. After about five minutes, they hit a dry streambed and began using it as a guide. Then Reave slipped and almost stumbled.

'Watch out for loose rocks. They last thing we need is for one of us to break his ankle.'

Slowly the crest of the hill came closer. When they were only fifty yards away, Reave signaled to the Minstrel Boy. 'Keep low; we don't want to skyline ourselves.'

In a half crouch, they crested the hill. The lake was in front of them, contained in a bowl formed by the sculpted hills. Its mirror

surface reflected the dozen or more bonfires that burned along its far edge. By the standards of the force that had attacked Krystaleit, the camp was a small one. Three armored cars stood side by side, and maybe a dozen tents were pitched in a loose circle. They could just make out the shapes of men moving around.

The Minstrel Boy lay in the grass and stared. 'There don't seem to be that many of them, but these're more than enough to make a mess of Palanaque.'

'Let's move in closer.'

'Do we have to?'

'Can't stop now.'

The Minstrel Boy sighed and followed Reave down the slope.

Things are bad
How bad?
Real bad
Bad
Bad
You know what I mean by bad?
Bad
Bad
Real bad
Awful bad
Bad
Bad
So bad
Too bad
Bad as hell
Bad
Bad
And you know something else?
It's getting worse.

Primary Stanza of 'The Bad Mantra' by Clay Blaisdell

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was, beyond any doubt, a human arm. One of the fingers even wore a ring that no one had bothered to remove;. The filthy hunched figure with the highspikes and bone earrings dragged it from the fire, oblivious to the fact that it was hardly cooked, and, juggling the hot meat from hand to hand, began snatching bites from it. The way the creature's teeth flashed in the firelight suggested that they were made of stainless steel. The Minstrel Boy stared in horror as blood and grease dripped down the thing's chin.

'They've sunk to cannibalism.'

Reave took hold of his arm. 'Just walk on slow and don't look surprised at anything.'

'That's easy to say.'

'Our lives depend on it, so walk on.'

A second figure lurched up to the one crouched over the arm and tried to grab it from him. They scuffled together, grunting and cursing. In front of a nearby tent a human head had been set up on the end of a spear. The face was bloated and unrecognizable, but the spear looked uncommonly like the ones used by the Palanaquii hoplites. Beyond the tent two vulture bats, the kind that the DNA Cowboys had first seen in Santa Freska, were picking at something in the grass.

'What the hell is happening to humanity?'

Reave could scarcely repress a shudder. 'I'm damned if I know, buddy. I'm damned if I know. It's like we're on the fast slope all the way down.'

They walked slowly on through the camp, avoiding the large knots of men. As far as Reave could estimate there were about 150 in the force, heavily armed, about the same mixture of shootists, Margin boys, and neoprimitives they had seen atKrystaleit. They were in very bad shape. The only things there seemed to be plenty of were guns, ammunition, and rotgut booze. The soldiers looked ragged and haggard, and the whole camp stank of filth and unwashed men. The stink alone was a major shock after the perfumed courtyards and splashing fountains of Palanaque. The small army looked to be starving, and it was altogether possible that the cannibalism Reave and the Minstrel Boy had witnessed was a matter of necessity as well as calculated depravity.

The entire area was a picture of demoralization. As Reave and the Minstrel Boy had skirted the lake, taking advantage of the darkness, they had encountered no guards, patrols, or pickets. The raiding party clearly realized that it had little or nothing to fear from the army of

Palanaque, but at the same time, it did not seem ready to launch an assault on the city. The men appeared to be resting, gathering whatever strength they had left.

'What do you think happened to these guys?'

'It looks like they recently took a bad beating. They're a mess.'

They passed another head on a pole — it was still wearing its plumed helmet and was definitely one of the company from Palanaque. Reave and the Minstrel Boy no longer looked too hard at what the figures beside the fires were doing. *A* line of tethered lizards made a sorry sight. They looked as though they had been ridden long and hard. Their necks drooped, their skin hung loosely on their bones, and every rib was visible.

Beyond the fires and the circle of dirty tents, two bulky objects were secured with guy ropes and covered in plastic sheeting.

'What do you think those things are?'

'Beats me.'

'Does it occur to you that they might be a couple of aircraft?' the Minstrel Boy suggested.

Reave nodded. 'It does, indeed. Let's drift casually in that direction and take a closer look.'

'After that, can we get out of here? I feel like we're pushing our luck already.'

'Nobody's given us a second look so far.'

'It only takes one. I don't particularly care to be some degenerate cannibal's breakfast. Besides, we're too damn clean and well fed. We stand out.'

'We'll take a look at those things, over there, and then we'll melt away.'

They started walking slowly in the direction of the plastic-sheathed objects. They were just passing through the circle of tents when Reave froze. Three men had emerged from a nearby tent, the largest in the camp.

'I don't believe it.'

Reave quickly turned on his heel and walked off in the opposite direction, head down and hiding his face. The Minstrel Boy quickly followed him.

'You know those men?'

'Vlad fucking Baptiste! He's still alive.'

'What?'

'That's Gord, his driver, and the Old Metal Monster walking with him. They're all alive. This must be all that's left of his army.'

'How in hell did he manage to survive?'

'He must have somehow gotten out of Krystaleit before it blew.'

'And we've got to get out of here right now. There's bound to be

others here who can recognize you.'

' You 're not kidding.'

They walked as quickly as they dared toward the edge of the camp. It began to look as though they were going to make it — until a figure lurched drunkenly out of a clump of bushes where it had been relieving itself. To turn back could have been too obvious, so Reave pulled his hat down lower over his face and decided to brazen it out. As the drunk stumbled past them, he eyed Reave and the Minstrel Boy with a total lack of curiosity or even interest. Then, suddenly, he beamed.

'Hey, Reave Mekonta! You're looking good, boy.'

He stumbled back toward the fires. The Minstrel Boy turned and watched his staggering progress. He slid a knife out of his belt.

'He's drunk, but he's going to realize at any moment.'

The drunk stopped. He seemed to be thinking. He slowly turned. The Minstrel Boy held his arm loosely at his side.

'Here we go.'

The drunk's voice was an incredulous croak. 'Reave Mekonta?'

The Minstrel Boy's hand flashed in an underarm throw. Theblade caught the drunk square in the throat. He let out a surprised gurgle and collapsed. The Minstrel Boy ran to the body and retrieved his knife. As an afterthought he took the beat-up SG from the dead man's belt and hung it on his own.

'Now can we get the hell out of here?'

'What say we grab a couple of lizards and make a run for it?'

'Let's go.'

They unhitched a brace of the exhausted reptiles and led them quietly off into the darkness, away from the camp. Once out of sight, they swung onto the animals' backs, not bothering with saddles. It took a number of kicks to get the beasts moving, but finally they set to lumbering up the hill that lay between the camp and the stretch of river where the boat was waiting.

At the top of the hill, the Minstrel Boy wheeled his horse and looked back at the camp. 'There doesn't seem to be any kind of alarm.'

Reave pulled up beside him. 'They probably won't find him until morning.'

'If the vulture bats leave anything.'

Reave turned his lizard's head. 'Let's get going.'

The Minstrel Boy hesitated. 'I've got an SG.'

'I know you have.'

'I could beat it into the nothings.'

'Are you going to?'

'We could ride back into the camp and get another one.'

Reave shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

The Minstrel Boy raised an inquiring eyebrow. 'You don't?'

'I'd feel bad running out on the others.'

The Minstrel Boy did not say anything; he just sat motionless on his lizard.

Reave looked at him questioningly. 'So are you going, or what?'

The Minstrel Boy avoided Reave's eyes. He did not answer.

Reave glanced back. 'Don't fuck around, man. Just go. I don't blame you.'

The Minstrel Boy viciously spurred his mount. The reptile reared and wheeled on its hind legs, croaking in protest. He kicked it again and plunged back down the way they had come, running for the nothings.

Reave sat and watched him go. He slowly shook his head. 'I guess that's the end of that.'

Reave kicked his own lizard and started down the other side of the hill, toward the river. There was already the ghostglow of pseudodawn beyond the mountains. He was halfway down the hill when the shooting started. At first there was just the sound of a sudden firefight. On the far side of the hill the quiet of the night was shattered by the angry ultrasonic hiss of particle beams and a series of impact bursts. After a couple of seconds there was the pumping chatter of an automatic weapon that could only be the Minstrel Boy's AK. Reave reined in and stared back, drawing one of his pistols. His first instinct was to charge back to the Minstrel Boy's aid, but he resisted it.

'Fuck him. He was the one who ran out.'

He did not, however, move on. He sat gun in hand, leaning on his saddle. Not for long, though. The Minstrel Boy crested the hill with energy flashes bursting around him. He was flattened along the back of his galloping mount; the strap of the AK was cinched around his shoulder so that he could use it with one hand, and he was firing wildly behind him. Reave's lizard skittered nervously, but he kept it on a tight rein and held his ground. The Minstrel Boy pulled up beside him.

Reave grinned. 'You're back.'

The Minstrel Boy was out of breath. 'I got to be insane.'

A half dozen riders came over the top of the hill. Reave stuffed the lizard's reins into his mouth and returned fire with both pistols. The riders scattered for cover. Reave put the spurs to his mount.

'Let's get out of here!'

They ran for the boat as fast as they could. As they galloped side by side, Reave yelled across to the Minstrel Boy. 'What happened back there?'

'I started wondering if I was doing the right thing, and while I

was wondering, this bunch who were out drinking or jerking each other off or whatever, away from the main camp, spotted me and opened up. It was lucky they were too drunk to shoot straight.'

When they reached the river, the boat was still moored in midstream. Reave jumped from the saddle and yelled across to those on board. 'Throw down a couple of lines. We'll swim out. Get ready to go.'

He dived straight into the cold, dark water. The Minstrel Boy groaned, then splashed in after him.

The return to Palanaque was a headlong flight. The overseer used the lash unsparingly on the rowers, who stroked at a furious, heart attack pace. At one point Renatta drew the Minstrel Boy aside and questioned him about the SG hanging on his belt.

'Why the hell didn't you get out while you could?'

The Minstrel Boy, who was still in his wet clothes, drying off his knives, gave her a cold look. 'I just couldn't stay away from you, baby.'

'You're crazy.'

'Probably.'

After Reave and the Minstrel Boy had both given their accounts of what they had seen in the raiders' camp, the condition of the men, and the size of the force, there was a lengthy discussion not only about what might be done to protect Palanaque but also about how Baptiste had managed to escape the destruction of Krystaleit. It was quickly decided, much to the horror of the young ensign, who believed that he was hearing blasphemy, that the city was doomed unless it immediately revised some oiks fundamental religious beliefs and took account of the ways of the real world.

On the matter of Baptiste's survival, Renatta came up with one of the most convincing theories. 'You think it could have been that, after the capture of Krystaleit, the warlords fell out and started fighting among themselves? You said that Baptiste's men looked like they'd been on the losing end of a fight. Maybe they were run out of the city before whoever it was pulled the plug on the main generator.'

Reave nodded. 'Could be. Those kind of guys will have a falling out at the drop of a hat.'

The discussions on the boat were nothing compared with the talks that went down once they were back in the city. As soon as they landed, they were immediately escorted by Dass-el-Hame and a troop of soldiers to an audience with Parshew-a-Thar in the throne room of the Great Pyramid. It was there that the major frustration started to set in. The beloved Master seemed to have great difficulty grasping the real danger of his situation. He sat twisted in the lapis and gold throne with handmaidens at his feet and nefrites behind him waving ostrich-feather fans and did nothing but seize on irrelevancies.

'Couldn't we negotiate with this Baptiste? Offer him money to go somewhere else? There are always ways around these situations.'

The throne room did little to aid the visualization of the danger that lay at the other end of the settlement. Nothing could have been farther from the horror and squalor of Baptiste's encampment. Surrounded by such dazzling perfumed splendor, it was hard to believe that the filthy tents and wild-eyed cannibals hunched over the fires could exist in the same world. Anyone approaching the throne had to walk between twin lines of carved and gilded lotus pillars and across an elaborate marble and mosaic floor depicting the creation legend. Behind the dais that supported the throne, columns of scented vapor rose into the air and were crisscrossed by decorative lasers. Beyond the pillars, to the left of the throne, a knot of gaudily dressed courtiers, including the pair with the tall Aztec- style headdresses, watched the audience in silence while a vibra trio played a slow, soothing twelve-tone canon. To the right of the throne a squad of immaculate soldiers stood at attention, their spears at parade rest.

Reave slowly folded his arms across his chest. He was determinedly standing his ground at the foot of the dais, feet planted firmly on the mosaic sun mother and coiling snake. The Minstrel Boy stood slightly behind him and had so far let Reave do most of the talking. Both men were doing their very best to ignore the surroundings.

'I don't think you're quite grasping the situation.'

The beloved Master twitched angrily. 'Don't tell me I'm not grasping the situation.'

Reave went on regardless. 'These raiders are starving and desperate. They can't be bought off. They may not even have the option to go somewhere else. They're going to fall on this city like a swarm of heavily armed locusts and strip it bare. The only thing they aren't short of is firepower.'

'There has to be a way to reason with them, to appeal to their logic.'

'These are degenerates. You can't reason with them because they're almost certainly not sane. They don't operate according to logic; they're running on some murderous feral instinct, and you can't negotiate with bloodshot psychotics. You either kill them or get out of their way.'

'I can't accept that.'

'You'd better accept it, man. You'd better wise up to the facts, or you're going to find your city burning around your ears.'

The beloved Master turned puce and half rose from the throne. 'I will not be spoken to like that.'

He was about to order his guard to arrest Reave, but then he

thought better of it. Despite all of Dass-el-Hame's protests, Reave was wearing his pistols openly displayed in his belt. Even Parshew-a-Thar was not going to risk bloodshed in his own throne room. Reave, who had figured that out from the start, made one final attempt to get the beloved Master to see sense.

'There is only one way to save your city, and that's to repeal this moronic prohibition on advanced weapons. You have a comparatively large army, and properly equipped, their numbers could make up for their inexperience, but they have to be armed.'

The beloved Master was shaking his head. He looked like a fat, frightened baby bird. Finally he clapped his hands over his ears. He was losing what small cool he had left.

'I won't listen to this. I've already told you how that subject is not open to discussion. General Zeum will take care of the defense of the city. I trust General Zeum. He doesn't upset me. You have upset me, and this audience is at an end.'

Reave finally lost his temper. 'You're a fatuous idiot.'

Parshew-a-Thar still had his hands over his ears.'I can't hear you.'

Reave gestured to the Minstrel Boy. 'Let's get out of this insanity.'

They turned on their heels and marched stiffly out of the throne room. The beloved Master was out of his throne and shouting at his guards.

'Stop them! Arrest them!'

Two of the guards approached Reave, who stopped them with a furious glare.

'I wouldn't try it if I were you.'

They didn't. Outside, in the first antechamber, Renatta, Blaisdell, and a somewhat groggy Billy Oblivion were waiting. They had heard a good part of the proceedings.

'I take it it didn't go well.'

'It's goddamn lunacy.'

Reave rounded on Billy. 'Where the hell have you been?'

Billy shook his head. 'Damned if I know.'

Dass-el-Hame came hurrying out of the throne room. 'You've done a terrible thing. The beloved Master is beside himself with rage.'

Reave snarled angrily at him. 'Terrible? You think that's terrible? When Baptiste gets here, you're all going to have to revise your definition of the word "terrible."

Renatta interrupted the exchange before it could go any further. Reave was starting to look as though he might hit the courtier.

'More to the point, what are we going to do now?'

Reave calmed down a little. 'We're going to see Showcross Gee. If nothing else, he can release us from our contracts. We can't be ordered into a situation that is plainly suicidal.'

Showcross Gee appeared to be expecting them. It was the first time any of them had been in the section of the Great Pyramid that had been taken over by the metaphysicians. It was another shiftspace, an internal area that was much larger than the external dimensions would logically allow, much like the one Reave had seen in the ziggurat in the little settlement that had been the target of his final raid with Baptiste. It had the same pyramid-shaped space, with a square floor and triangular sides that leaned in to a central apex point. A larger but otherwise identical pyramid-shaped block hung in the air with no visible means of support. Unlike the starkly bare chamber inside the ziggurat, this one seemed to be undergoing some kind of highly technological construction. Cables and glowing plasma conduits snaked across the floor, and a towering rack system housed a complexly sophisticated biode. A large disk-shaped object some thirty feet across was being assembled in sections directly beneath the floating pyramid.

Showcross Gee's only companion in the chamber was Stent. It was starting to look as though the metaphysician was using the metal man as a permanent bodyguard. Reave was curious to know what the man thought he had to fear. There was no sign of any of the other metaphysicians, and it had to be assumed that this chamber was not the only space they occupied in the Great Pyramid.

'I understand that you have seen the enemy.'

Reave looked slowly around the chamber and nodded.'That's right. We went to their camp.'

'And I also understand that the beloved Master is having a little trouble discarding his illusions.'

Renatta regarded the metaphysician with deep suspicion. 'You seem very well informed.'

'We loosed a few snoopers into the environment of this pyramid. These people have no means of detecting them, although why they should even bother is debatable. They are incapable of keeping secrets.'

'So you only use the snoopers for a little electronic early warning?'

Showcross Gee nodded. 'Exactly.'

'Then you most probably heard what we were discussing in the anteroom.'

'We cannot release you from your contracts at this time.'

Blaisdell gave him a hard look. 'You can't expect us to simply stay here and die.'

Reave glanced at Lister Stent. 'Where do you stand in all this? Still just carrying out orders?'

The metal man inclined his head slightly. 'Quite the reverse. I'm

with you in this. I cannot see how we can legitimately be ordered to remain here under the current situation. We have the right to protect our own lives in a set of circumstances that are quite beyond our control.'

Showcross Gee looked from one contract warrior to the next. 'Your lives will be preserved. You have my guarantee.'

Reave did not look as if he believed a word of it. 'You seem to be hanging on to a few illusions of your own. That's Vlad Baptiste up at the other end of the settlement. He's pathological about you people, and he isn't going to stop until you're all dead. We have no way of protecting either you or ourselves unless the Palanaquii wise up.'

Showcross Gee waited a full ten seconds before he spoke. He slowly extended a hand in the direction of the half-completed disk. 'All we need here is another forty-eight hours to finish our work.'

Billy Oblivion swayed. 'What the hell is that? An old-time flying saucer?'

Showcross Gee ignored him. 'When our work is done, there will be a unique escape route for all of us.'

Reave was unbending. 'This city won't hold for forty-eight hours. There's a chance that Baptiste may have a couple of aircraft.'

That was obviously news to the metaphysician. He was silent and thoughtful. 'It would be a mistake to leave here at this time.'

'It'd be suicide not to.'

'I've already told you that we can take control of the Great Pyramid and seal ourselves in.'

Reave was shaking his head. 'I don't know.'

'Consider this. There is one thing that could make Baptiste negotiate with the beloved Master.'

'What's that?'

'Us.'

Reave knew that he should have thought of that himself. It was glaringly obvious.

'You think that Parshew-a-Thar would ask Baptiste to spare the city if he turned over the metaphysicians?'

Showcross Gee half smiled. 'The metaphysicians and their seven mercenaries.'

'Okay, everyone's ass is on the line.'

Having made his point, Showcross Gee went on. 'I think it's almost a certainty. The court of Palanaque may be blinkered and stupid, but they're clutching at straws. It's bound to occur to them. It they don't think of it, Baptiste certainly will. You've described how his men are close to exhaustion. He may see it as a way to avoid an immediate direct assault on the city himself.'

'He'll never keep his word.'

'Of course he won't, but the Palanaquii will want to believe him so badly that they'll go along with any nonsense. Once he's disposed of us, he can destroy the city and its population at his leisure.'

'I still think our only practical option is to leave immediately. '

Showcross Gee was being unusually patient. 'Let me make a suggestion.'

Reave raised an eyebrow. 'An offer?'

Showcross Gee looked at him coldly. 'A suggestion.'

Reave sighed. 'Okay, a suggestion.'

'You will hold to your contract for two more days. Military contact with Baptiste's raiders will be strictly at your own discretion unless we are directly threatened. Your only duties will be to protect us in any situation where our lives and liberty are at risk, regardless of whether the threat comes from Baptiste or the Palanaquii. The moment the situation in the city becomes untenable, we will retreat in here and seal the pyramid.'

'All of us will retreat into the pyramid?' Renatta asked.

Showcross Gee eyed her curiously. 'You don't trust me at all, do you?'

'Should I?'

'I'm afraid you may have to before this thing's over.'

'So do we all get into the pyramid?'

'If it is humanly possible. You have my word.'

'And once inside you will include us all in this mysterious way out?'

'That's correct.'

'Do you want to explain this escape route to us?'

Showcross Gee shook his head. 'Not yet.'

'Just another item that we have to take on trust?'

'For the moment.'

Reave turned to Stent.'How does all this sit with you? You're the one with the fine-tuned sense of duty.'

Stent raised a metal hand. 'Under the terms of our contract, it sounds like a legitimate request.'

Reave scowled. 'And if it was couched as a direct order, you'd be compelled to enforce it.'

Stent reluctantly half bowed, his armor making a soft, sad squeaking noise. 'I'm afraid that I would.'

Reave faced the metaphysician. 'It looks like you have your two days.'

Showcross Gee laid a calming hand on his arm, 'You shouldn't take it all so personally, Reave Mekonta.'

Reave's shoulders sagged. He was suddenly very tired. Although he hated to admit it, the metaphysician was right. The man was doing

the best he could according to his own weird priorities. 'All we can hope is that Baptiste takes his time coming.'

As it turned out, Baptiste took a day and a night to reach the city. There was plenty of warning of his approach. General Zeum had organized a system of signal fires all along the river, starting just a few miles below the rapids. As Baptiste's force was sighted, the fires were lit and those who had been keepingwatch made themselves scarce. From the intervals at which new fires flared in the dark, it seemed that the raiders were moving very slowly. The moment the first signal was sighted, Reave, along with the Minstrel Boy, who also seemed unable to sleep, climbed to the same vantage point on top of the gatehouse from which they had watched the parade of the Grand Army. They stared silently at the pinpoints of flame in the dark. The beloved Master had ordered the pseudostars extinguished for better visibility, and the night beyond the lights of the city was black as pitch. Reave could imagine the line of ragged men with their cruel, hard faces and worn-out mounts. In his mind's eye he could see the drooping necks of the spavined lizards as they dragged themselves toward yet another slaughter.

'This has got to be the end to it, one way or another.'

The Minstrel Boy, who was watching from farther along the parapet, straightened up and looked at him. 'You say something?'

'Just talking to myself.'

'Just as long as you ain't talking to one of those gods they're so strong on around these parts.'

Reave laughed despite himself. 'You know me better than that.'

A sudden burst of music cut through the night air of the quietly waiting city, complex cascading figures from a chromacon played by an expert.

'Clay Blaisdell.'

'Grandstanding as usual. Trying to make it into history.'

Reave smiled, but he could not shake the oppressive melancholy. The music only made it worse. 'You think we'll hear him play that thing again?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at Reave in shocked surprise. It was not like Reave to give in to that kind of pessimism. 'Will you put a cover on that talk?'

Out of the flatland, beyond the city walls, other lights were moving. Zeum's preparations for repelling the invaders were in full swing. Reave had to admit that even though it was a suicidal fantasy, it was also a textbook defense. Neat shield squares were positioned in staggered rows, taking maximum advantage of the contours of the ground. If Zeum had been expecting three hundred Spartans, he would have been in fine shape.

The raiders came across the horizon just as the first gray ofdawn flashed gold with the coming sun. Just as Reave had imagined, they were strung out along the riverbank, black shapes plodding through the early morning ground mist like a dejected wolf pack, dispirited as men can be when there is no alternative except to perpetuate the horror. Reave could feel it as strongly as if he were down among them.

In comparison, Zeum's troops were magnificent. Their white tunics and scarlet plumes were dazzling. The sun flashed from their armor, and the horses of the small cavalry unit pranced eagerly. Reave turned away. It was too depressing to watch. They were quite insane.

The Minstrel Boy yawned. 'So now they're here, what do we do?'

'Absolutely nothing. I'm going to stay right here and observe.'

The Minstrel Boy looked curiously at Reave, who seemed to be in the grip of a grim fatalism. It was probably time to start getting everyone drunk. It might be the only way to get through the day.

The engagement started painfully slowly. At the same plodding pace, the raiders turned inland from the river. The Minstrel Boy noticed that there were no armored vehicles with the column. It was possible that they had no more fuel. They crossed the top end of the flatlands until they were spread out in a loose skirmish line — and there they stopped. They did nothing except lean on their saddles and wait. They reminded the Minstrel Boy of a flock of vultures waiting for a death in the herd.

The herd, or to be more precise, the leader of the herd, did not seem content to let death come in its own sweet time. General Zeum, followed by his aides and executive officers, clattered out of the gates below Reave and the Minstrel Boy on a huge black charger with a blond mane and tail. He cantered past the series of squares, doffing his plumed helmet and accepting the organized cheers of his legion. When he reached the last square, the one closest to the line of Baptiste's raiders, he reined in the charger. He was too far away for those on the gate tower to actually hear the order, but the intention was plain.

'I see it, but I don't believe it.'

Of all the stupidity Reave had witnessed since he had arrived in Palanaque, Zeum's act had to be the crowning folly. With a crash of drums, the square nearest the line of raiders advanced.

Close-ordered and in half-time lockstep, they moved on the enemy, spears advanced, banners spread, maintaining a perfect formation. It took just five raiders to cut them to pieces. They slipped from their saddles, took a couple of paces forward, and, without the slightest pretense of taking cover, raised their weapons just as though they were shooting at targets on a range. The casual way they opened fire was nothing short of insulting. Taking their time and picking their

shots, they gunned down every one of the hundred men in the phalanx. The bloodily bizarre part was that the hoplites did not falter. They stepped over the fallen and just kept going. Even when there was only a handful of them left, the Palanaquii made no attempt to halt their advance, let alone run away or otherwise try to save themselves. At no time did the hoplites attempt to throw their spears: That would have been a breach of discipline. As the smoke drifted away from the litter of bodies, the raiders holstered their weapons and climbed back on their mounts. One at a time the Palanaquii squares moved up and changed position, filling the gap left by the massacred hundred.

The Minstrel Boy sighed and shook his head. 'I guess this is going to be repeated over and over until there are none left.'

Reave turned and leaned against the parapet. 'I won't be sticking around to watch it.'

The Minstrel Boy was looking toward the river. 'I think something else is about to happen.'

An armored car was racing along the riverbank, leaving a cloud of dust. Reave turned and looked. 'That's Baptiste himself.'

'And what's this?'

There were a pair of specks in the air above the horizon, leaving white contrails against the blue of the sky.

'Oh, shit, they do have aircraft.'

The specks were growing rapidly bigger and taking on recognizable shapes.

'A pair of box-wing deltas. I wonder where the hell Baprtiste recruited them from.'

The two identical dark blue needle-nosed aircraft with strange box-kite wing formations were coming in fast and low. They swept over the line of raiders in a roar of rocket motors. Their nose-mounted cannons began to flash and stammer. They roared over the Palanaquii squares little more than ten feet off theground, strafing as they went. While the dead fell and the dying kicked and screamed, the survivors rigidly held their position. Again there was no attempt to find cover, and no order was given to do so. As the leading plane approached the city wall, it lifted. The Minstrel Boy sprang at Reave and pushed him down into the shelter of the parapet. A line of small explosions stitched their way across the gatehouse roof. They lay huddled beneath the wall as the second plane followed the first. When it passed, the Minstrel Boy scrambled to his feet.

'WeVe got to get down from here before they come back.'

The two planes screamed on across the city, following the path of the main central boulevard. Halfway to the pyramid the first aircraft loosed the rocket that was slung beneath its fuselage. The rocket hit the pyramid about two-thirds of the way up in a burst of red fire and

black smoke. The targeting of the Great Pyramid might have been a fine piece of symbolism, but for tactical effect it was a complete waste of ammunition. The marble surface was burned and shattered, but the underlying stone structure was virtually indestructible. Before the second delta could fire, there was the roar of a third motor.

'What the fuck does he think he's doing?'

Jet Ace was rising straight up into the air, his dorsal rocket firing at full power.

'Does he really believe he can take on both of them?'

'He's always wanted to be a hero.'

The deltas had spotted the flying man and were turning to meet him. The leader opened fire, but Jet Ace executed a quick forward loop. He extended his right arm and loosed a massive focused heat blast. It struck the first plane directly in front of the rocket housing, and the delta blew apart like a bomb going off. Debris spiraled down over the city. Watching the spectacle. Reave and the Minstrel Boy completely forgot about their own safety.

'He got one! He goddamn got one!'

'Watch out for the other one, Ace! He's above you!'

The remaining delta had gained height and was turning to attack. Jet Ace let go with another blast, but it went harmlessly by the enemy aircraft. He desperately tried to gain height, but the delta pilot had him in his sights, and only a fast swooping roll saved him from being nailed by a burst of tracer. The rocket man and the airplane both came around, each in a tight Immelmann, each jockeying to lock onto the other's tail. Jet Ace proved to have the greater turning power. He fired again and hit the delta somewhere aft. Smoke streamed from the body of the plane, and it began to lose height.

'He's going down! He's going into the river!'

Just seconds before the delta hit the water, the pilot fired his missile. The rocket began to climb and turn.

'Damn it! He hasn't seen it.'

'It's behaving like a heat seeker.'

Jet Ace had his back to the missile. His arms were spread, and he was stationary in midair, riding on his powered-down dorsal rocket.

'He's taking a fucking bow.'

Almost like a swimmer, Jet Ace pushed forward and executed a slow victory roll. The missile was almost on him. It was likely that he never knew what hit him. There was little of Jet Ace left after the explosion, except for the shrapnel that rattled down on the streets and roofs of the city. The Minstrel Boy turned away.

'Now we're six.'

Although the behavior of the

defenders during the fall of Palanaque seems scarcely plausible, the diaries of General Zeum that so miraculously survived the destruction tend to confirm, albeit from the general's uniquely psychotic perspective, the major details that are recounted in the legend. Although their seemingly mindless suicide may appear aberrant in the extreme, it was far from unique in human history. Frederick Barbarossa marched his crack troops over cliffs to their deaths to demonstrate their blind obedience to visiting dignitaries. Both the Poles and the Finns sent cavalry into battle against German tanks in the war against the Nazis. The Zulu nation engaged the British at the first Battle of Rourke's Drift. They had spears, while the British were armed with breech-loading Martini rifles. There was, however, one difference in this instance. The Zulus won.

— Pressdra Vishnaria

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

'Hear this, people of Palanaque. The options in frontof you are painfully simple. Your army is gone, and your city will be mine in the time it takes to burn through this gate. If you force me to do that, I shall go on burning until there is nothing left of your city except its ashes. People of Palanaque, I am Vlad Baptiste, and it is not for nothing that men call me the Torch.'

Baptiste stepped back from the microphone and paused to let the threat sink in. He was a square, Napoleonic figure in a stained leather coat, flowing scarf, and black goggles. His feet were planted firmly on the roof of the armored car, and his hands were clasped behind his back. The car was drawn up in front of the gates of Palanaque, but his amplified voice could be heard all through the city.

'There is one way that your city can be saved from destruction. I want the metaphysicians from Krystaleit. Deliver them to me, and I will spare the city and place it under my protection.'

After the destruction of the two aircraft and the death of Jet Ace, Baptiste had stopped playing with the Grand Army of Palanaque, and the raiders had gone about their fast and systematic extermination with bloody efficiency. A tearful Parshew-a-Thar had watched the slaughter, all the time demanding that his men be given real weapons. Unfortunately, that religious reform had come too late to do them any good, and they died to the last man. With only the gates of the city separating them from Baptiste, Reave and the Minstrel Boy decided it was high time they withdrew to the pyramid. When they arrived there, they found the entrance sealed.

'You think Showcross Gee's double-crossed us?'

The Minstrel Boy looked around tensely. 'I kind of figured that he'd keep his word.'

Baptiste's voice boomed on. 'I, Vlad Baptiste, will personally guarantee that any group of individuals who delivers the metaphysicians to me will be given control of the city under my own ultimate jurisdiction.'

It occurred to the Minstrel Boy that maybe Baptiste did not in fact want to raze the city. Maybe he actually needed a base in which to rest up and regain his strength. The Minstrel Boy could imagine just how unbearably wretched life would be in any city that had the Torch as its ruler. He had more important things to worry about, however. There was still no suggestion that the entrance to the pyramid was about to come open for them. On top of that, Baptiste was setting a deadline.

'You have one hour. If the metaphysicians are not delivered to me

in that time, I will commence to destroy the city and its population.'

The Minstrel Boy looked around anxiously. 'Where the hell are the others? You think they're inside already?'

Reave did not answer. He was scanning the boulevard for any sign of Billy, Renatta, or Blaisdell. 'This is one sorry time for them to go missing.'

Gord the driver helped Baptiste down from the roof of the armored car and folded away the microphone. The raiders were drawn up in front of the city walls in four ranks. The only casualties they had suffered so far were the two delta pilots who had been lost to Jet Ace. The warriors sat hunched in their saddles as though they were quite ready to wait forever.

Inside the city, on the other hand, there was a considerable sense of urgency. The beloved Master had not missed Baptiste's implication that if he did not hand over the metaphysicians, there were plenty in the city who would, and that it was unlikely that he would survive such a transaction. It was not that Parshew-a-Thar had any objection to turning the metaphysicians over to Baptiste and what was undoubtedly their certain death. The problem that had him screaming hysterically at his retinue was that he was not sure if he was going to be able to deliver them.

'What about those brutes that they have protecting them, those bodyguards with the weapons? They're almost as bad as Baptiste's men. Am I supposed to face those animals myself?'

The first that Reave and the Minstrel Boy knew of all this was when General Zeum, followed by all that was left of his army, came striding down the boulevard toward them. The general had decided not to perish with the Grand Army. When he had finally realized that the situation was hopeless, he had hastily withdrawn inside the walls with his aides and a small personal guard.

'I think he's on his way to ask us for Showcross Gee and his gang.'

'Are you going to give them to him?'

Reave glanced back at the pyramid. 'Not unless they open up the door.'

The Minstrel Boy swatted at something with the flat of his hand. It was a thin silver cylinder about the size of a cigarette. 'Goddamn snooper.'

The snooper skittered away, easily avoiding the blow, flew off to a safe distance, and hung in the air, apparently watching the two of them.

'I figure that little sucker belongs to Showcross Gee.'

'At least he's still taking an interest in the outside world.'

'The outside world is getting a little radical for me. I wish he'd open that door.'

General Zeum and his band of men were two-thirds of the way along the boulevard. Reave and the Minstrel Boy were momentarily distracted as Billy Oblivion came around the corner of the pyramid. He looked out on his feet, but he did have the multiplex slung over his shoulder.

'Did the world end yet?'

'You vanished again.'

'I decided that I'd jag out during the slaughter.'

'You're fucked up, Billy.'

Billy glared at the two of them with hung-over belligerence. 'Oh, yeah? I suppose you two feel a whole lot better for watching it all happen?'

'Do you have any idea what's happened to Renatta or Blaisdell?'

Billy shook his head. 'I've been out for the last hour.'

'But you heard Baptiste?'

'Couldn't miss him.'

Reave pointed to Zeum. 'We think the generalissimo is coming for the metaphysicians.'

'Is he getting them'.'

'I don't think so. Not yet, at least.'

Zeum was only fifty yards away. The hoplites with him appeared to be armed only with spears, but it was hardly the moment to take chances. Reave drew one of his pistols.

'I think it's time to put the brakes on this.'

He held up a hand and called out to Zeum. 'That's quite far enough.'

Zeum ignored him. Reave drew his pistol, took quick aim, and sprayed the road surface a few paces in front of the general. Zeum and his men stopped dead.

Reave yelled again. 'Do you hear me, General Zeum?'

'I hear you.'

'If you have something you want to discuss with us, you'll have to come up here on your own.'

Zeum turned for a hurried discussion with his aides. Then he started walking alone toward the plaza in front of the pyramid. Even in the face of what had to be considerable stress, he still maintained his confident military stride.

Billy shook his head in wonder. 'Is he terminally stupid, or what?'

The general started up the steps to the plaza. Reave stopped him halfway up with a gesture of his pistol.

'You can say your piece from there.'

'You must be aware of the current situation.'

Reave nodded. 'We heard Baptiste's ultimatum.'

'All rules of toleration are suspended. We have to ask you to

surrender the metaphysicians to our custody.'

'Baptiste will never keep his word.'

'We intend to preserve the city by any means open to us.'

The Minstrel Boy stepped into the conversation. 'It seems to me that you're between a rock and a hard place, General Zeum. Don't get me wrong, though. I'm not saying that we're the hard place. Although we're not about to hand over the metaphysicians, it's hardly up to us. They sealed themselves in the pyramid, and they don't show any sign of coming out.'

For the very first time Zeum's confidence deserted him. He had lived all his life and spent all his career operating according to a tailored fantasy. He had no patterns or guidelines with which to handle brutal, ragged reality. 'What can we do? Baptiste intends to destroy the city.'

Reave regarded the general with open contempt. 'There's nothing you can do. It's too late. About the only thing you could try would be to ask Baptiste for more time.'

Zeum looked at him with an almost childlike hope that someone would make it all right, after all. 'You think he might allow that?'

Reave closed his eyes. He could not stand looking at that idiot any longer. 'I don't think you've got a prayer.'

Zeum's temper suddenly exploded. Once again it was an infantile regression, a temper tantrum. 'I'll get weapons from Baptiste. First I'll deal with you, and then I'll get those damned metaphysicians out of there, even if I have to burn them out.'

Reave's patience was at an end. 'Yeah, sure. Do what you like.'

Zeum squared his shoulders and marched away.

Reave turned and stared at the blank surface of the pyramid with its black scar from the air attack. 'I don't know if you can hear us, Showcross Gee, but you better let us in there pretty goddamn soon. It's going to start coining unglued out here in a matter of minutes.'

Billy was looking in the opposite direction, across the city and beyond the gates, where Baptiste and his men were waiting out the ultimatum.

'There's something I'd really like to have explained to me,' he said.

'What's that?'

'What exactly does Baptiste have against the metaphysicians? I mean, how did all this get started?'

Reave looked at him in surprise. 'You mean you don't know?'

'How the hell should I know? I was never one of his boys.'

Reave shrugged. 'It's easy. He was one of them.'

'He was what?'

'He was one of them. He was a metaphysician once upon a time.'

Billy blinked. 'That lunatic?'

'They cut him off, drummed him out of the order.'

'Because he was crazy?'

'It was more specific than that. He was doing this series of experiments that involved tapping directly into the brain patterns of live humans. Rumors started going around about massive death tolls and how Baptiste was having hundreds of duplicates beamed in from Stuff Central. The College of Metaphysicians investigated, and they found that he had hundreds of human duplicates wired up to these kind of storage devices. He was literally draining off their life forces like some kind of high-tech vampire. The college outlawed the practice and expelled Baptiste in disgrace. He was lucky to escape with his life. It was only the fact that the College of Metaphysicians had never granted itself capital powers over its members that saved him from execution. Needless to say, Baptiste didn't see it that way. He swore that he'd get his revenge, and he's been doing exactly that ever since. I imagine he sees this as his crowning moment.'

Billy sighed. 'And we're right in the middle of it.'

Reave nodded. 'Ain't that the story of our lives?'

'Ain't it just.'

Baptiste's deadline came and went, and to everyone's surprise, absolutely nothing happened. The Minstrel Boy was deeply suspicious.

'You don't think Baptiste gave them more time, do you?'

'It hardly seems possible.'

'Some kind of deal's been done.'

Reave turned to Billy and nodded at the multiplex. 'How much juice you got left in that thing?'

Billy pulled a wry face. 'Running on dry. Two smartbombs, half a clip of spreaders; after that it's down to particle and focused heat until the power base runs down. Why? Are you thinking of making a fight of it?'

'I'm still hoping that pyramid will open up and let us in.'

'It ain't done it yet.'

The Minstrel Boy noticed something at the other end of the boulevard. 'Now, what in hell is this?'

A single rider had come out from one of the gate towers and was racing hell for leather for the pyramid.

'That's Zeum's horse.'

'That'sRenatta.'

'Huh?'

'I guess we'll find out.'

Renatta did not slacken her pace as she reached the steps that: led up to the plaza, and the charger almost stumbled. At the top of the steps she swung down from the saddle, gasping for breath.

'You know what. . those assholes. . have done?'

The Minstrel Boy grabbed her and hugged her with open admiration. 'You stole Zeum's fucking horse!'

'Never mind that. The beloved Master just gave the city to Baptiste.'

'He really doesn't have any choice.'

Renatta shook her head. 'No, no, you don't understand He's about to open the gates, and he wants the whole city to pledge loyalty to Baptiste. They're running on high-test panic, trying to save their skins at any price. The beloved Master is going to make an announcement. The raiders will come in unopposed and take the metaphysicians out of the pyramid. I came to warn you. We have to get inside the pyramid right now and hope that Showcross Gee has this mysterious escape route on-line.'

Reave gestured to the sealed entrance. 'There's a slight problem about that.'

Renatta's face fell. 'Oh, shit.'

There was a loud electronic crackle from speakers all over the city. Renatta gripped the Minstrel Boy's arm. 'Listen, listen, the little bastard is going to make the announcement.'

Parshew-a-Thar's high nervous voice was relayed across all of Palanaque.

'My children. .' The pause seemed to go on forever. 'Evil days have come to test our loyalty. Evil men are among us. Necromancers and heretics are conjuring abominations in the most sacred places of our Great Pyi-amid. Their mercenaries wait without with their instruments of death.'

Billy looked outraged. 'He's talking about us.'

'But although the storm is in our midst, fear not. A savior is at hand. The warrior Baptiste waits outside our gates.'

'What?'

'How does he get around the fact that the savior wiped out his army as lately as this morning?'

'Vlad Baptiste has come with fire and a sword and has demonstrated the ways in which we have fallen into error. We must heed his words and prostrate ourselves before him. He will enter the city and free us from the abominations.'

Billy was shaking his head, looking bemused. 'I can't believe. .'

Reave glared at him. 'Sure you can.'

'We command you, my children, when the warrior Baptiste rides through the city, you will come out, you will leave yourhomes and come into the streets and, on your knees, make the fullest obeisance to this our deliverer.'

The Minstrel Boy let the AK slide from his shoulder. He felt its weight with his hands as though he needed the touch of something

hard and tangible. 'I think that's the sickest joke I ever heard.'

Renatta pointed. 'The gates are opening.'

The quartet at the foot of the pyramid had expected that Baptiste, in the new and absurd role of savior, would come through first, riding on the turret of his armored car, grim-faced, goggles pushed back, and scarf flapping in the breeze. To their surprise, nothing of the sort happened — indeed, absolutely nothing prepared them for the first sight that did come marching out of the shadows of the gatehouse and down the boulevard.

'It's Stent!'

'Stent's changed ssdes?'

'It's not possible.'

Renatta quickly put them straight. 'It's not Stent.'

'It sure looks like Stent.'

'It's the same model armor, give or take a couple of decades, but it's not Stent. You can see that this one's much more corroded and scarred than Stent.'

'Where did it come from?'

'Baptiste must have been holding it in reserve. It only appeared after he issued the ultimatum.'

'Wherever it came from, it seems to be coming for us.'

The metal man was advancing on them at a rapid pace. The main body of raiders had started to emerge from the gatehouse, but they were coming on slowly, giving the metal man plenty of room. As the lizards plodded down the boulevard, it seemed that the entire population of Palanaque was coming out. On both sides of the boulevard they silently fell to their knees, prostrate as commanded, foreheads pressed to the ground and arms outstretched. The Minstrel Boy watched with a horror that, although different, quite matched the horror of the earlier slaughter. The shards of the Damaged World decayed in different ways. The Palanaquii had surrendered all will to a spurious, divine order, and they had all but ceased to think. It was the psychosis of slaves. In their craving for the comfort of a god they had refined abasement to a surreal art. Now, on a single command of their idiot master, they were changing gods. Maybe Baptiste would spare the Palanaquii and develop a taste for being worshiped. It would undoubtedly be an era of refined evil for as long as it lasted. The Minstrel Boy abandoned the speculation with an angry shake of the head. He did not want to think of what Vlad Baptiste might come up with as a divine being, and in any case, the metal man was getting close.

Reave looked back at the pyramid. There was still no sign of it opening. He beckoned to the others. 'We'll pull back to the entrance and hope that Showcross Gee pulls us out in the nick of time.'

Billy thumbed the ready on the multiplex. 'You want me to try a smartbomb on him?'

Reave shrugged. 'I doubt it will do much damage to that armor, but you can try.'

The amplified voice from behind took all four of them completely by surprise. 'Hold the bomb, Billy Oblivion. This traitor is mine!'

The entrance to the interior of the pyramid had silently opened. Lister Stent was coming down the stepped side of the giant structure. Clay Blaisdell was slightly behind him.

Reave yelled to the others. 'Okay, let's go. Let's get up those steps and inside.'

But Stent held up a hand. 'Wait! There's something that I have to settle.'

He marched past Reave. The other metal man had halted. Stent pointed an accusing arm at him 'You are a traitor. More Mornon. You have allied yourself with our enemy, and in so doing you have betrayed our kind and you have betrayed your host city.'

'Krystaleit is no more, and I am a free agent. I am ronin.'

'We are never ronin. You should have died with the contractor. The very fact that you are here is proof enough. You committed your act of treachery before the destruction of the city.'

'I am a free agent, Lister Stent.'

Stent crossed the plaza with fast, power-assisted strides and halted at the top of the steps that led down to the boulevard. Mornon waited at the bottom.

'You will face me one on one, More Mornon.'

'I 'm not afraid of you, Lister Stent.'

'Face retribution, traitor.'

Violet fire flashed from Stem's arm. Mornon staggered back a couple of paces in the face of the blast. The surface of his armor glowed cherry-red, but he did not go down. All around, everyone stood and stared. Baptiste and his men had come to a complete stop. Reave and the others had also turned and were watching in amazement. It was the spectacle of a lifetime. The metal men were rare enough in any circumstance, but to actually see two of them going against each other like a pair of steel sumo wrestlers was close to unique. Momon returned the blast, and it was Stent's turn to stagger. It quickly became clear to the onlookers that the two armored troopers were very evenly matched. Although the firepower built into their arms and chests was awesome in the extreme, their armor was equally formidable, and neither man seemed able to deliver a decisive knockout. For some minutes they both stood their ground, their huge tracked boots anchoring them to the flagstones. They tossed massive energy blasts at each other across the width of the plaza steps. There

were moments when both men were completely enveloped in glowing energy. Cascades of sparks flew for dozens of yards all around, and the closest spectators had to scramble back to a safer distance.

Stent was the first to realize that they were at a stalemate. He suddenly changed his tactics. He charged down the steps at full speed and threw himself at Mornon. Both the crash of metal on metal and Mornon's amplified grunt of pain were audible all over the city. Stent began smashing his arms repeatedly on the top of Mornon's headpiece, powered forearm blows that rang like a giant hammer hitting the anvil of the gods and would have pulped a normal human in an instant. The obvious intent was to jar loose the implants where Mornon's armor and weapons systems interfaced with his natural body. Unable to blast through his armor, Stent was trying to force him to his knees and cripple him internally. Mornon immediately responded by wrapping his arms around Stent's waist as though trying to crush him in a mechanical bear hug. As Mornon tried to lift Stent off his feet, Stent in his turn kept up the relentless hail of blows to the top of Mornon's head.

The metallic savagery reeled backward and forward, with neither combatant gaining the advantage. Steel claws extended from the ends of Mornon's arms. He seemed to be trying to force them into the side seams of Stent's chest armor and penetrate it that way. Stent began to twist and turn, seeking to break the grip. When that failed, he tried another tack. The end of his right arm swiveled, and a plate opened to give access to a limpet ring. He clamped that to the side of Mornon's headpiece and started feeding raw plasma directly into the man's armor. The pain must have been unimaginable. Mornon had not cut off his voice amplifier, and his screams were horrific. Despite the plasma, which must have been burning him alive, his retractable claws continued to scrabble desperately at Stent's armor. Finally, they seemed to find a purchase. He was able to insert the tips into the seam between the chest plates. He threw himself backward seeking to widen the gap by pure force. Stent also screamed. Mornon began to feed power through his claws, directly into the interior of Stent's suit. For long minutes the two of them stood locked in a deadly embrace with glowing, uncontrolled power rippling across the surfaces of their armored suits. The noise that was coming from them no longer resembled anything that even approached human.

It was not clear which one blew first — the twin explosions were close to simultaneous. Stent's entire headpiece was blown off, and it spun high into the air. The weapons built into his left arm discharged in a single blazing arc that melted the stones at his feet. Mornon's fatal blast was more internalized. It did not split his armor, but flame and hot gas jetted from every vent and orifice. The two metal men fell

against each other with a doomed knell crash, two lifeless steel hulks still on their feet, propping each other up. Smoke drifted lazily from the hole where Stent's head once had been.

Despite all the horror that had gone before, the whole city, including the contract warriors and Baptiste's raiders, was gripped by a long minute of silence. It was as though the population had been stunned by the very personal display of superhuman violence. When the grip let go, however, all hell broke loose. There was a howl from the raiders as they spurred forward.

Reave turned and yelled. 'That's us! Let's go! Let's get inside the pyramid.'

The remaining five contract warriors were climbing the side of the pyramid as fast as they could. There suddenly seemed to be an infinite number of steps between them and safety. The Minstrel Boy's breath was already coming in short, labored gasps. They should have climbed higher while the metal men were flighting, but they had been held spellbound by the clash of the ancient military behemoths. It suddenly looked like a spell that would prove ultimately disastrous. The raiders were on the plaza, and weapon fire was already hitting the steps. Everything had started to move with the alarming speed of crisis and pumping adrenaline.

The Minstrel Boy was sweating and red in the face by the time he reached the platform in front of the entrance to the pyramid. He was running half doubled-over, ducking the multicolored fire that flashed over his head. The great stone blocks that served as doors were still rolled back. He looked behind. To his surprise, Renatta, Blaisdell, and Billy were still laboring up the steps. The raiders were dismounted and climbing, too, firing from the hip as they came. The Minstrel Boy unslung the AK 5000 and thumbed off the safety. He fired a long burst into the climbing raiders. Two of them went down, but then he had to duck a particle beam as one of their comrades took careful aim at him.

He heard Renatta scream. She was down. Blaisdell changed direction to go to her aid. He had taken only a couple of steps when he, too, was hit. A spreader had removed all of his right shoulder and a portion of his head. His body rolled down five steps before it finally came to rest.

The Minstrel Boy started down again. He had to reach Renatta. She was one of them, much more so than Blaisdell. If she was dead, he could die, too. The protective aura would be gone. He found that he was muttering to himself as he slapped another clip into the AK. 'This is too fucking real. This is all too fucking real.'

Billy reached her first. He bent over her briefly and then waved him back. 'There's nothing you can do! She's dead!'

He turned and dropped a smartbomb on his pursuers. The

Minstrel Boy stood stock-still. He was numb. Renatta couldn't be dead. She couldn't be dead.

Billy was yelling at him. 'Get moving! Don't be a damned fool, she's dead!'

Reave had come out of nowhere and grabbed him. He dragged him up the last few steps and through the entrance. The stone blocks were already pivoting back into place. Billy rolled through behind them with a couple of raiders hot on his heels.

As he rolled, he loosed a heatflash from the multiplex, and they were charred instantly. The stone blocks closed. They were sealed inside the pyramid.

For the first few seconds they were blind. After the bright, white marble outside, the interior of the pyramid was a place of impenetrable gloom until their eyes adjusted. The Minstrel Boy slowly lowered his gun, but he could not quite put it down. A red LED was flashing on the AK. He was out of ammunition. There were no more fresh clips. He released the empty one and let it clatter to the floor.

'Renatta's dead.'

Billy and Reave looked at each other uncomfortably.

'We know.'

'And Blaisdell.'

'It was a mess out there at the end.'

'And Stent, and Jet Ace.'

'Get off it, boy. We ain't out of the woods yet.'

The Minstrel Boy's face was set in a fixed stare. His voice had the dead quality of someone going into shock. 'I can't get worked up about Stent and Jet Ace. They were too fucking weird and alien, all that metal.'

Reave was moving toward him. 'Not now, pal. Don't thousand-yard us. It's not the time for it.'

The Minstrel Boy looked Reave straight in the eye. 'Just the three of us left. You, me, and him. How is it that we always make it through? Because we're the flicking DNA Cowboys? Is that why they're dead and we're not?'

He swung around and hurled the AK angrily away from him. It hit the floor with a crash and skidded across the smooth, polished stone.

'Why the fuck didn't they get me, too?'

He was bitter and close to hysterical, but he seemed to have come out of the shock.

Showcross Gee was suddenly there, although no one had seen him step out of the darkness.

'When you gentlemen are through with your emotions, perhaps you would follow me?'

It was hardly a surprise that humanity ended in the way that it did. It had been trying for long enough. It was also probably a very good thing that they finally succeeded. If they'd ever managed to reconstruct their reality, the trouble that might have caused could have been of truly cosmic proportions. I am well aware that there are those among the New Generation who argue that we originals, who made the step into this afterlife, must have brought at least a vestige of humanity with us. This is a fundamental error. The final discorporation purged all humanity from us. After our departure there was nothing but the Cataclysm.

— Pressdra Vishnaiia

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Showcross Gee extended an arm, inviting the DNA Cowboys to enter the strange shiftspace room.

'Right now we are powering up for the final transference.'

All signs of construction had gone from the place. The disk on the floor was fully complete and was suffused with a strange radiant energy, like a shaped block of marble in which colored veins pulsed with iridescent light. The underside of the floating pyramid rock was mirroring the glow. The other twenty-six metaphysicians were standing in a circle around the large disk. Their eyes were closed, and they seemed to be locked in deep concentration.

'It will be a half hour before we achieve full power and are able to make the crossing.'

Showcross Gee had still not adequately explained exactly what the crossing was. The Minstrel Boy had folded into himself, but Billy leaned close to Reave.

'What do you figure this rig is? Some sort of matter sender?'

Reave shrugged. 'I'm damned if I know. Apart from maybe Stuff Central, I never heard of anything that could beam matter through the nothings.'

'Maybe they cracked the secret.'

'Maybe. All things are possible.'

Showcross Gee caught the end of their conversation. 'Please be patient, gentlemen. I have to concentrate for the power-up right now, but all your questions will be answered when the time comes. Perhaps, for the moment, you should simply observe how Baptiste is treating his newly found city and be thankful that you are not still out there.'

A pseudosurface on one of the triangular walls of the chamber showed multiple images from the snoopers that continued to move around the city.

The Minstrel Boy eyed Showcross Gee coldly. 'Some of our number are still out there.'

'That was unfortunate but unavoidable.'

'You could have let us into the pyramid a whole lot sooner.'

Showcross Gee was equally cold. 'I can't discuss this right now.'

The Minstrel Boy's lip curled. 'Yeah, right.'

Baptiste was treating Palanaque little better than any other settlement he had conquered. The bodies of the beloved Master, Zeum, and most of the court, including Dass-el-Hame, were already dangling, faces blue and tongues protruding, from ropes beneath the archway of the main gate. Their frantic last-ditch bargaining had not

saved their lives, after all. The DNA Cowboys observed them with the grimly sick satisfaction of men whose worst fears had been confirmed. Zeum had gone to his death calmly, keeping his military bearing to the very end. Parshew-a-Thar, on the other hand, had kicked and screamed until the very moment he was dropped into empty air.

As it turned out, Baptiste was not actually razing the city. His men were going from block to block looting and raping, killing any citizens who got in their way or protested. There were also many citizens put to the sword simply on a whim or for the amusement of individual raiders. The Old Metal Monster was leading his usual band of torturers. There was, however, a certain restraint in the destruction and slaughter. The buildings were not being torched, and the slave class — the stepfords and the epsilons — were being noticeably preserved. Also, no one as yet was being eaten.

'It really does look as though Baptiste's getting himself a city.'

'He's welcome to it.'

'Can you imagine what it's going to be like after he's been running the place for a couple of weeks?'

By some unpleasant synchronicity, the moment Billy spoke Baptiste's name, his image appeared on the pseudosurface. A snooper seemed to be homing in on him. He was standing on the roof of one of the taller buildings in a characteristic pose, legs spread, shoulders hunched, and hands clasped behind his back, watching his men going about their business. Every now and then he would stare thoughtfully at the pyramid. The snooper was getting closer and closer, until it had the warlord in a tight profile close-up so that every dirt-encrusted line in his face was shown in detailed relief.

'If that thing doesn't back off, he's going to see it.'

And see it he did. He moved like a striking snake, trapping the small cylindrical snooper in one glovd hand. His eyes were hidden behind the black goggles, but he was clearly looking into the sensor jewel.

'I suppose this is one of your toys, Showcross Gee. How long do you think you're going to be able to remain shut up in that pile of stones?'

Reave turned. Showcross Gee had left the circle of metaphysicians and was staring at the image of Vlad Baptiste.

'He knows your name?'

Showcross Gee nodded. 'Of course he knows my name. He knows the names of everyone here.'

Baptiste had raised the snooper close to his face. His huge image filled the wall. There was something both bizarre and unnerving about the way that, while the silent circle of metaphysicians focused their most intense concentration, the hugely magnified features of their

greatest enemy loomed over them.

'Unless you choose to remain in there until you starve to death, you will eventually have to come out. I will be waiting, Showcross Gee. You can count on that. You will have to face me.'

Reave felt a chill. The only consolation was that Baptiste had no idea what was really going on inside the pyramid. If he had, he would probably have set the unfortunate Palanaquii to tearing it down stone by stone. Not that Reave could take much comfort from that thought. He had no guarantee that the weird device was going to really get them out of there. They were still taking the metaphysicians absolutely on trust simply because there was no alternative.

The image of Baptiste abruptly vanished. He must have crushed the snooper in his fist. Showcross Gee turned away from the pseudosurface and addressed the DNA Cowboys.

'Observe the disk.'

The disk had started to revolve slowly. It also appeared to be sinking into the floor of the chamber, except that "sinking" was not the right word. It was certainly moving downward, but the floor of the chamber was curving to accommodate it. The previously solid stone was forming a shallow but rapidly deepening conical bowl. Matter was actually being bent.

'When your name is called, you will step out onto the disk.'

Reave stepped in front of Showcross Gee. 'I think it's time you told us where we re going.'

Showcross Gee's expression was transcendentally smooth. 'It's a little hard to define our destination in words.'

The DNA Cowboys looked at each other. Even the Minstrel Boy was raised from his mortal apathy. Finely honed instincts told them that they were about to hear some very bad news.

'What do you mean by "hard to define"?'

'As yet we have no geography, but you can rest assured that it is a step beyond.'

'A step beyond what?'

Reave was looking decidedly unhappy. 'What exactly are we talking about here?'

'Nonreversible discorporation to a malleable afterlife.'

Billy's eyes narrowed. 'Isn't nonreversible discorporation just a fancy name for death?'

'Technically it is akin to death, but the availability of a controllable afterlife makes it a completely different change of state. You will be stepping into a completely new dimension.'

'Do we know what might be waiting for us in this new dimension?'

'No.'

The Minstrel Boy was feeling sick. 'You're telling us that we're all boldly going to a brand-new heaven.'

'Please. Don't insult me.'

Billy was not buying it; he had had plenty of experience with discorporation. 'How can we know that there's any afterlife at all?'

'Our earliest researches demonstrated its existence.'

The Minstrel Boy had a dangerous look in his eye. 'We're going to heaven on your say-so?'

Billy still wanted to know more. 'Do we retain our memories and personalities?'

'It's unlikely. We will emerge considerably advanced. There may be some vestigial impulses, but they will most probably fade very quickly.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly and finally shook his head. 'Forget it. I'm not setting foot on that thing.'

Showcross Gee looked at him in amazement. 'Are you insane? You'll be a god.'

The Minstrel Boy's eyes were bleak. 'I'm a man, damn it. I'm the Minstrel Boy. It's as simple as that. I was always what I am, and I intend to die that way. I don't want to be a god. Gods are dangerous.' He was aware that he sounded like a petulant child, wrapping himself in the last tatters of his dignity, but he did not care. He had meant what he had said. The last tatters of his dignity were all that he had left.

At that moment, a disembodied voice started calling of names. 'Marhess Gan. . Tyler Gee. . Nalson Treece. . Lustor Mahi. .'

In turn, each of the metaphysicians stepped down onto the disk. In fact, their feet did not touch the disk itself. Some invisible horizontal field held them in midair, on the level where the original floor had been. Each one immediately began to change. Their flesh turned transparent, and it was possible to see their bones and circulatory systems. Then flesh became crystalline and, finally, two-dimensional. After that point, each metaphysician simply vanished.

'Persode. . Matmash Ri. . Aphentaup. .P. Vishnaria. .Renk Do. .'

When they were gone, their clothes drifted down through the field as though subject to the normal rules of gravity. When the white suits touched the disk itself, they vaporized. No trace remained.

'Bein ut Loew. . Mathmashamu. . Rehgath Gee. . Aba Melmoth. .

The circle of metaphysicians was hiilf-gone. Reave faced the Minstrel Boy. 'Are you really going to stay here?'

'Absolutely. What about you two? Going to seek your fortune as gods?'

'Ethbuck. . Gronin Gee. . Pretalat Sna. . n'Brandei. .Touser Lafter. .Sal Oti. . Ptran Gee. .Orte Gee. .'

Reave took a deep breath. 'I'm staying, too. I'm not going to get on that carousel.'

It was down to Billy. There were just six metaphysicians left. Their white suits glowed in the muted light from the disk. Certainly a part of him wanted to chance the experience.

'Fest Arnn., Luthor Modesto., TorRomm. . Mahii Mag Gee. . Etif-Erle. .'

Only Showcross Gee was left. As his name was called, he glanced back sadly at the DNA Cowboys and then stepped off into discorporation. Billy suddenly moved. Three paces took him to the edge of the bowl created by the disk.

'Billy Oblivion.'

And then he froze. He could not step out.

'There is no second call.'

After that the voice was silent. Billy walked slowly back to the others.

'So what did we prove by ducking the roll call of destiny?'

'That we're stubbornly human.'

'No shit.'

The disk was rising again. The floor was regaining its original shape and level. The glow started to fade. The floating pyramid block sank slowly to the floor. All energy and color seemed to have gone from the chamber. It was lit by a single white light.

Billy sighed. 'And that's that.'

Reave settled himself with his back against the wall. 'You know what this means?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'It's the blaze of glory.'

'The entire Bolivian National Guard.'

Billy also sat down. 'I ain't ready to die yet.'

'It's got to happen sometime.'

'We were offered a way out.'

Billy squatted down beside the other two. 'Yeah, but we blew it, each in his own way.'

'So when do we make this final bow?'

'I guess when we're all ready for. .' Reave's voice trailed off, and he made a helpless gesture. 'Hell, I don't know.'

For a long time the three men sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts. Finally Billy could not stand it any longer. He stood up and announced that he was off in search of wine. After about twenty minutes he came back with two large jugs.

'What the hell, let's drink this down and go out and face Baptiste.'

The other two looked at him in silence, knowing that it was probably the best suggestion.

Billy set the wine down. 'Can you think of any way around this?'

Reave shook his head and uncapped the first jug. 'No way at all, but what the hell? We knew this was coming from the first moment we all met up again.'

The Minstrel Boy raised an eyebrow. 'You really believe that?'

'Don't you?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded. 'Yeah, I believe it. It ain't just us, either. You can smell it. The whole fucking world is running out of road.'

Billy took the jug from Reave. His face was wistful. 'There's still a lot of world out there. Still a lot that I'd like to see. '

'Yeah, but it's fading fast. The realities are going one by one. Krystaleit's gone, and it won't be too long before Baptiste destroys this place. I figure the other places probably aren't faring much better. We haven't seen anything but violence and destruction since we got back together.'

Reave agreed. 'Minstrel Boy's right. We've seen the best of it.'

Billy took a long pull on the jug and looked from Reave to the Minstrel Boy. 'This is really it, isn't it?'

They both nodded.

'Sure looks like it.'

Billy shook his head. 'Damn.'

A lopsided grin spread over the Minstrel Boy's face. 'At least we get the chance to go out with a bang.'

'What's the point of going out with a bang if there ain't nobody left around to tell the story.'

The Minstrel Boy took the jug. 'You hit a deep philosophical point there, Billy Oblivion.'

Reave uncapped a second jug. 'Seems to me that all we can do is sit around and drink our fill. When we're drunk and ready, we'll go out and see to Baptiste. At least we can take a few of the bastards with us.'

The initial effect of the wine was to make them maudlin. The memories started coming out, all the brave tales of the old days before so much trouble had come across the world, tales of gun-fights and women and seven-day drunks and nights of wretched excess. There was a period of enthusiasm and affection when the three men vied with each other to convince themselves what fine, reckless, and dashing old boys they had been. The alcohol moved on, however, and let the sadness in. They could not contain the knowledge that memories were all they had left. Boasting gave way to gloomy introspection, and they lapsed into silence.

They drank steadily, each man alone with his own thoughts, with little or no sense of time. In the end it was the Minstrel Boy who took a pull from the nearest jug and found that there was only a mouthful left. He swallowed it, sediment and all, and hurled the jug away. It

shattered against the far wall.

The Minstrel Boy stood up with an angry finality, 'That's it. I've had enough. Let's get to it.'

Billy and Reave finished the other jug in a couple of gulps and also got to their feet.

'Yeah, there ain't no point in putting it off.'

As they walked toward the portal to the outside, Reave drew one of his pistols and handed it to the Minstrel Boy.'You don't want to go out without a gun in your hand.'

The Minstrel Boy briefly squeezed his arm. 'Thanks.'

There was a short delay while they searched for the mechanism that would roll back the stone blocks. As far as the Minstrel Boy could estimate, it had to be dark outside. He entertained a brief, fragile hope. Maybe the darkness would give them an edge. Maybe they could slip away. Then Billy found the controls to the doors, and there were no more reprieves and no more excuses.

Reave's face stretched into a forced grin.' Any bright ideas'?'

Billy and the Minstrel Boy shook their heads. Reave nodded to Billy.

'Okay, here we go.'

Billy threw the switch. The blocks started to pivot. Sunlight streamed in, almost blinding them. It was broad daylight outside. Either they had lost all track of time, or the metaphysicians' disk had changed the rate of its passing inside the pyramid.

'Ready?'

The Minstrel Boy sighed. 'Fuck it, let's go.'

They ran out firing wildly. Baptiste seemed to have half his force deployed on the steps below them. They had never looked into so many leveled weapons. For a stretched instant of unreality no one fired at them. Then every one of Baptiste's guns opened up. The blaze of glory came all at once, a single fireflash that could not be sustained or prolonged. White pain, white light, white heat.

'Top of the world, Ma!'